

Secrets on the Shore of California

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Category: H2O: Just Add Water

Genre: Mystery, Romance

Language: English

Characters: Bella H.

Status: Completed

Published: 2012-02-29 04:24:20

Updated: 2012-10-05 02:31:49

Packaged: 2016-04-26 13:18:58

Rating: T

Chapters: 30

Words: 52,183

Publisher: [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

Summary: #1 in the California Supernaturals trilogy. Marina is a 16 yr. old girl with a secret: she's a shapeshifter. When Bella Hartley moves to town the two become fast friends, but Bella has a secret too. Will secrets be revealed? Also, strange things start happening to people in town. Can Marina and Bella figure out what is going on and fix things before they spiral out of control?

## 1. New Girl

"Class. Eh-hm." Mr. Grady frowned at the rowdy class and pushed his slipping glasses back up his nose. "Class, I'dâ€"Listen up!" he shouted over the multiple voices. Everyone quickly stopped talking. "That's better. I'd like to introduce you to a new student. Everyone, this is Isabella Hartley."

"Bella, actually." She interrupted. The girl had long honey-blonde hair that fell a couple inches past her shoulders.

"Okay, where are you from Bella?" Mr. Grady asked. Bella smiled at the class and all the boys basically fell off their chairs. She was wearing a white tank top with coral shorts and sandals. She looked like she was from Miami or the Bahamasâ€"definitely someplace with lots of sun and sand. I knew she would fit right in here on the coast of California.

"I've lived all over the world, but most recently Greece." Greece? I was definitely impressed. She definitely had some sort of accent, even though I couldn't tell what it was. It sounded slightly Australian, or maybe British?

"Very nice, thank you, Bella. You can take a seat now." Mr. Grady said, gesturing to the rows of desks in front of him. There were only two empty seats in the classroom. One was surrounded by a bunch of lacrosse players who had puddles of drool on their desks, and the other was right next to me. Without hesitating, she made her way down

the aisle and slid into the seat on my right. Maybe I would like this girl. As soon as Mr. Grady started his boring lecture on the Native Americans, I took the chance to introduce myself to Bella.

"Hi, I'm Marina." I whispered leaning slightly across the aisle. She smiled at me.

"Bella." She whispered. From her tote bag she pulled out a notebook and pen.

"Oh, don't worry about taking notes," I said, "He always emails us his lecture for the period. Just give him your email at the end of class."

"Doesn't he realize that no one will pay attention then?" she laughed. I smiled back at her.

"Yup, but it doesn't bother him. I think he just likes to hear himself talk." We both giggled. "What do you have after this?" I asked.

"Algebra." She said.

"Ew," I wrinkled my nose, "I'm so not a math person."

"Trust me, neither am I." She said, shaking her head. We laughed again.

"Girls, pay attention please!" Mr. Grady said in a stern voice. We shut up. I knew that I didn't want to have the whole emailing the notes thing removed from class. We both looked down at the paper in front of us and began mindlessly doodling. I tried drawing a dolphin, but it came out looking more like a slug with floppy arms. I glanced over at Bella's paper—hers were better than mine, but not by much. She was clearly as much of an artist as I was—and I was at about a Kindergarten level.

"Nice tail." I whispered over to her.

"What?" she exclaimed, frantically looking down at her legs. Her face was panicked.

"Your mermaid drawing." I said and pointed to her paper, looking at her curiously.

"Oh!" she chuckled, ignoring her previous freak-out, "yeah, can you tell that drawing isn't my thing either?"

"Don't worry, I'm worse than you are." I said and showed her my dolphin slug. She laughed. "Hey, would you like to join my friends and I in the courtyard for lunch this afternoon?" I asked.

"Sure!" she said, "thanks!"

"No problem! Just meet me outside the cafeteria at the beginning of the period." I told her.

"Okay!" She smiled at me and I gave her one in return. Then I turned back to my horrible doodles. I wished I could actually draw a dolphin—it was probably my favorite animal in the world. Well, I

could never decide between the dolphin and the wolf. But I'm biased. You would be two if those were the only two animals in the world that you could turn into.

Okay, I should probably explain. I come from a family of shapeshifters. Everyone in my family can turn into a specific animal, that is, except for my mom. My dad can turn into a cougar, my older brother, Cole, can turn into a tiger, and my younger sister, Skye, can turn into barn owl. My sister and I are special. According to my dad, we have never had an animal that can fly in our family. I can turn into two animals, which is something that has only been spoken of in the legends of our kind. Neither of the animals I can turn into is unusual though. I can shift into a common gray wolf and a bottlenose dolphin. I can never choose which one I prefer. I love racing through the forest and climbing the cliffs, but I also love swimming and jumping in the sea.

Every day after school Cole, Skye and I shift and explore the nearby forests. It is something that I always look forward to. Even though it is only a wolf that I get to shift into when we go exploring, I still try to find time to go swimming. It's a bit harder because my parents are a bit protective. They don't like the idea of me being out in the ocean alone, but that doesn't really stop me. The only problem with swimming as a dolphin is that I have no one to swim with me, and, honestly, it gets kind of lonely.

At lunch, I waited outside the long line of people trying to get the usual pizza or chicken fingers for Bella. After a few minutes I saw her enter the loud room with her paper bag lunch in her hand. She scanned the multiple faces for me. I waved at her and relief flooded her face. Weaving her way through the crowds she made her way over.

"Hey! You all set?" I asked.

"Yup!" she said and held up the brown paper bag.

"Alrighty, follow me." I led her out the doors and into the sunny courtyard. "Okay, just to warn you, Tommy can be a little cocky, Grace loves to gossip, and Annie is super shy so don't be offended if she doesn't talk to you." Bella looked at me with her eyebrows raised. "Don't worry. You'll be fine. They'll love you. Trust me." I smiled at her but I caught a hint of uncertainty in her eyes. I was sure she had nothing to worry about though. I mean, with all the places she's lived, she was probably an expert on how to make friends even if spring was already peeking out from behind the frosted morning dew.

We walked up to my usual table with our lunches. Everyone stopped talking when we approached. "Hey guys!" I said, "This is Bella. Bella this is Annie," I pointed my short, blond haired friend on the left and continued around the circular table, "Connor, Grace," I pointed to my long, dark haired Asian friend, "Tommy and Jet. I mean, John."

"Forget my real name already, Mar?" John teased.

"Jet?" Bella asked, slightly raising her eyebrows.

"She never calls him John. Jet's a nickname." Tommy explained.

"More like an inside joke that the rest of us don't get." Grace said, glaring at me a bit. I shrugged my shoulders and slid into the seat next to Jet, shoving him aside slightly. Bella took the seat between me and Annie. Jet gave me a smile that I returned. He has been my best friend since seventh grade when his family moved here from Los Angeles. And my friends were right about both things: most of the time I don't call John by his real name and Jet is an inside joke only between the two of us. I created a nickname Jet for him last year when we were in ninth grade. Everyone thinks I call him that because of his jet-black hair, but I really call him Jet because of the color of his fur.

## 2. Shapeshifters

Okay, what I said before was actually incorrect. John and I have been good friends since seventh grade, but we didn't become best friends until our freshmen year. A lot of things changed that year, and it had nothing to do with the fact that we had just entered high school.

For shapeshifters, the ability to change into an animal is genetic. Your body always has the ability to shift, and whether or not you act on that ability is up to you. However, if by the time you reach the age of 15 and you still have never shifted, your body takes over the process causing you to start to shift randomly. You could shift anytime, anywhere, unless you learn to control it. Usually, other shapeshifters in your family will teach you how to shift, and how to control it, at an early age to avoid any public catastrophes when you hit 15. This is what my father did. I first shifted into a wolf when I was seven and then a dolphin three years later when I was 10. John wasn't as lucky as me.

When he first moved to our small town in seventh grade, and he told me he was adopted, I didn't think anything of it. I mean, there's nothing wrong with that, right? Right. What I didn't know was that there was a problem with that. I remembered the day perfectly. It was the middle of December, only two days after John's 15th birthday and one day before the start of winter break. We were waiting in the front office of school for my mom to pick us up, since it was absolutely freezing outside. We were making fun of the way our geometry teacher chose to restyle her hair and discussing what we hoped to get for Christmas. Suddenly, John stopped talking and this look of fear slowly spread across his face. I barely heard him whisper,

"Not again," under his breath before he sprinted out the door and towards the woods on the side of school without any explanation. Naturally, I followed him. I found him easily. After all, I did know the forest pretty well. He was crouched behind two trees about a hundred yards in from the parking lot. I approached slowly.

"John?" I asked, "Are you okay?" It was a dumb question because I obviously knew that hiding behind trees and breathing heavily on the forest floor was not normal behavior for him. And even after being the only double shapeshifter in existence for at least a thousand years, I was not prepared for what happened next. It started with the sound of fabric ripping: first his t-shirt, and then his jeans. I instinctively took a step back. I watched as his clothes fell away

from a body that was no longer one I recognized. Well, it was one that I vaguely recognized. It was muscled and full of fur like the wolf body that I saw reflected back to me from the shallow waters of the stream my siblings and I often passed on our adventures in our shifted forms. The only differences I saw were his size and the very dark color of his fur. His golden eyes stared up at me for just a second before he dashed off, further into the forest.

"No! John! Wait!" I called after him. But it was no use. I knew I would never catch him in my human form. Shivering against the bitter temperature, I began to take my clothes off. I wrapped my jeans, underwear, shirt and bra inside my North Face and tucked it, along with my sneakers, between the two trees John had tried to hide behind, right next to the shredded remains of his clothes. Then I got down on all fours and focused on becoming the gray wolf I knew so well. I shifted easily, making no sound greater than the soft wind. When I felt the dead leaves against the pads of my paws I opened my eyes. I used my snout to push pieces of John's clothing around to see if there was anything worth salvaging. Of course there wasn't. I turned back to the deepening forest and lifted my nose to the sky, trying to find the trail he left. It wasn't very hard. I immediately recognized the scent of another wolf mixed with John's fear. I took off in a run letting my nose lead me to where John had disappeared to. It wasn't a surprise when I found him at the base of the familiar stream about a mile and a half away from the school. I came through the brush noisily, not wanting to surprise him. His black head whipped around. I cautiously took another step towards him. He turned to face me, not growling as I probably would have done if I was greeted by an unfamiliar wolf, but simply standing his ground, waiting for me to make the first move. I stopped about six feet away from him. I didn't know what to do. He had no idea that the gray wolf in front of him was the friend he had left by the twin trees only minutes ago. I decided to sit down to try to show him that I was friendly, but when I did he just stood there staring at me.

The biggest problem, or setback, when it comes to shapeshifting is that we have no way of communicating with one another when we are in our animal forms. It's not a problem if everyone agrees on where they are going and what they are doing before they shift, but even then, other issues tend to arise. In my family, the issues are mainly with my younger sister. Because she is an owl, she usually flies high above the rest of us and can see if we are approaching something unfriendly. Only, she has to shift back into her human form in order to warn us of the danger. And, based on John-the-wolf's facial expression, it looked like that was exactly what I was going to have to do. Well, this is going to get very awkward, I thought. I was used to my family, even my dad and older brother, seeing me naked, but I had definitely never been completely naked in front of friend, especially when that friend was a guy. I knew we would eventually be even though, he had to shift back into human form at some point and he didn't have any clothes to put back on. I realized that I actually needed him to shift back into human form. I had a lot questions for him. I was now able to recognize the signs of not shifting before the age of 15 like I had learned about, and I wanted to know why he had waited. I wanted to know if he even knew that he was a shapeshifter.

I took a deep breath and stared into his yellow eyes until he stared back into my milky silver ones. Then I let my wolf fur recede and my body reform until I was kneeling on the frost-bitten ground in my

human body again. John stumbled backward and fell into the stream, soaking himself. I couldn't help but laugh at him. Wobbling, he picked himself up out of the water. He opened his mouth but when he realized he couldn't talk he shut it and just stared at me. I watched as his eyes started at my face then travelled down my torso, briefly pausing at my breasts and hips, before coming back up to my face.

"I need you to shift back," I said, "into human form." I clarified when he looked confused. He shook his jet-black head from side to side. I crossed my arms over my chest so they partially covered my breasts. "You have to." I said, but he shook his head again. I frowned. Then I realized what he was trying to tell me. "Do you not know how to shift back?" I asked. He nodded. "Oh." I tried to remember what my dad had told me to do when I first learned to shift. It had been so long ago. I didn't have to think about it anymore, shifting just came naturally to me now. "You need to remember what it feels like to be human," I told him, "think of a distinct memory and then focus on that. Remember having hands, arms, feet, and hair instead of fur." He nodded again to show that he understood. "It helps if you close your eyes." I added and smiled at him. He did as I instructed and about a minute later the John I had always known was on his hands and knees in front of me. He looked up at me and a grin broke out across his face.

"I did it!" he said as he rolled back onto his knees, putting him in the same position I was in. I purposely kept my eyes on his face.

"Congrats." I said and gave him another smile.

"So you're one too?" he immediately asked.

"Shapeshifter, you mean? Yes." I said. His eyes widened.

"Shapeshifter?" he echoed. Well, I guess that answered my question about whether or not he even knew he was a shapeshifter. "How is this even possible?"

"It's genetic." I told him, "I get it from my dad's side of the family." He nodded like he understood, even though I was pretty sure he wasn't making sense of any of it. "This wasn't the first time you shifted, was it?" I asked, slightly changing the topic.

"No," he said quietly, "it started just a few days ago."

"Right after your birthday?" I guessed.

"Yeah, actually," he frowned, "how'd you know?" I didn't answer him right away.

"We have a lot to talk about." I finally said, "And, I don't know about you, but my fingers are going to fall off if I don't get out of this cold soon." He gave a small chuckle and agreed. "I'm gonna shift again just cause it is easier and faster to get back. You should probably do the same," and then, seeing the look on his face, I added "if you can."

"I can try." He said uncertainly. As soon as he said that, I shifted back into my gray wolf and was finally able to get my body to stop

shaking from the cold air. I took a few steps back towards the direction of the parking lot before turning around to face John again. He was staring at me. I gave a short growl to tell him to just shift already. He jumped but immediately got the message. I watched him as his eyes closed and his eyebrows scrunched together in concentration. I waited, but nothing happened. He opened his eyes and looked up to me. "I don't think I can." I jerked my head down in a nod, then turned away and began slowly walking back to the school. I could hear him noisily following me, dead leaves crunching and sticks snapping in his wake.

### 3. Water

I had been afraid that the lunch table would become awkwardly silent with Bella there, but that was not the case. In fact, I wondered if there had ever been so much talking. Connor and Grace kept firing questions at Bella. Grace because she has a need to know things, and Connor most likely because he thought that Bella was hot. I could tell Bella was a bit surprised by the amount of enthusiasm everyone was giving her, but she quickly adjusted and after only about 20 minutes of talking it was as if she had always sat with us. Even Annie started laughing and talking with her. Okay, she was definitely going to fit in here.

"So where are you actually from, Bella?" Grace asked, leaning across the table slightly.

"Well, I was born in Australia and that's where my parents grew up, but I only lived there until I was four." She said. Grace nodded.

"Where have you lived since then?"

"My dad works in hotel management, soâ€|everywhere," Bella laughed, "When I was four we moved to New Zealand. Then when I was six we went to Costa Rica. Only a year after that we moved to France. When I was nine we moved to Ireland. Then we moved to South Africa when I was 11 and then to New York when I was 13. We moved to Greece last year, and now I'm here." All of our eyes widened at her.

"Wow." Jet said softly, "I've only moved once and that was tough enough, butâ€|eight times?"

"Yeah, it's kind of hard to make friends when you know you're probably not going to be staying." She said, frowning slightly.

"Well, I'm sure I speak for everyone when I say that you can count us as your friends." I told her. Jet, Tommy, Grace, Connor and Annie all smiled at her in agreement.

"What has been your favorite place you've stayed?" Grace asked.

"And if you don't say California, we're not friends anymore." Tommy joked. We laughed and I shook my head at him. Grace ignored him.

"Ha ha, but seriously, which of those places was absolutely amazing? They all sound incredible." She gushed.

"They were," Bella smiled, "but Ireland was definitely my favorite. It was just soâ€"soâ€|magical? You know?" She stared at a point beyond the faces around her. I could tell she was remembering what exactly made Ireland so magical.

"I've never been to Ireland," Grace pouted, "the only place I've ever been to is Mexico."

"I've been to Ireland." Jet said.

"Really?" I turned to him raising my eyebrows, "You never told me that."

"I went on vacation with my family when I was in fifth grade. It was pretty cool." He said, nodding in agreement with Bella. Then turning back to me he whispered, "You don't know everything about me, Mar." I narrowed my eyes at him, giving him my "I'm on to you" glare.

When the bell rang to end lunch Bella, Jet and I headed off to chemistry, a class that the three of us conveniently had together. Actually, I had three classes with Bella and Jet. Besides American history in the morning and chemistry right after lunch, I also had gym with her right after chemistry. Well, all three of us had gym after chemistry. For the past two years of high school, Jet and I have had at least four classes together. Last year, we had world history, biology, gym, and English I. This year, I get to spend all my afternoon classes with him: chemistry, gym, algebra and study hall, which isn't really a class but we still had it at the same time. When we entered the chem class we immediately noticed that the lab tables had beakers, tweezers, hot plates, and graduated cylinders set up on them. Today was definitely a lab day. Not even bothering to take our seats at our normal desks in the front of the room, Jet and I made our way to our lab table in the back of the room with Bella in our wake.

"Just sit with us," I said, "we only have three people in our lab group anyway." I beckoned for Bella to sit in the seat directly across from Jet and I. The third member of our lab group, the one that Jet and I usually force to take notes instead of taking part in the lab, stumbled and almost fell as he walked towards the three of us. He almost missed the stool when he went to sit down. Jet and I, along with probably the whole school, knew that Peter Quintin was the clumsiest kid you would ever meet, which was why when we were grouped with him for labs Jet and I immediately made him our designated note taker. We didn't need him knocking beakers and tubes over and making us not only have to clean up chemicals but also have to start the lab over again. It usually took us longer to complete the labs since it was only the two of us but it was better than Peter consistently causing problems. On the other hand, now that we had Bella too, maybe we would actually finish with the rest of the class.

Bella didn't even look at Peter as he clumsily sat down next to her. She was too busy staring at the large beaker in the middle of the table that was full of water. Her eyes were wider than normal as if she was scared. But what did have to be afraid of? It was only water. It was only when our teacher Mrs. Allen started class that Bella tore her gaze from the beaker and back to the front of the classroom. I watched Bella curiously. Something was up with her. I didn't know what, but she was definitely worried about something.

"I see that we have a new student," Mrs. Allen began, "welcome. Just see me after class so that I can make sure you get caught up." Mrs. Allen isn't one to waste time on introductions. She wasn't stupid: she knew Bella had probably gone through multiple class introductions earlier in the day. And besides, if the other kids in the class really wanted to get to know her they would have no problem putting forth the effort to do so. Bella was probably tired of getting up in front of 20 other kids too. "You're procedure is in the bucket on your tables and pH scales are up front with me. When you're ready, bring sample my table. Okay, get to work." I pulled the procedure out of the bucket in the center of our table, read the first step and then handed them to Peter to read for us.

"Let's do the control first." Jet said.

"Bella," I said grabbing the testers, "could you measure 10 milliliters of water into the graduated cylinder?" She glanced at the beaker full of water and then back up to me.

"Uh, sure." She said and then pulled the cylinder out of the bin. I noticed that her hand shook a bit as she poured the water. She didn't spill it. She carefully set the beaker down to her right and then handed the 10 milliliters to me. We continued through the lab. I noticed that anytime Bella had to handle water she got this cautious look on her face. Was she afraid of water?

"Bella, could you pass me the beaker of water next to you?" Jet asked. Bella hesitated for a moment.

"I'll get it." Peter jumped in, grabbing the large beaker. He went to hand it to Jet, but bumped it against the bucket in the center of the table, spilling almost all the liquid. Bella jumped out of her seat to avoid getting wet but she was too late. The water had already dripped off the table and onto her legs. "Oh, oops. Uh, sorry." Peter apologized. But I don't think Bella heard him. She looked down at her wet legs and then raced for the door.

"Bella!" I called but she had already left the classroom. I shot Jet a worried look before I followed her. I ran down the hall to the nearest bathroom expecting to find her there, but she wasn't. Bella had disappeared.

#### 4. Going Unnoticed

The mile and a half back to the twin trees where our clothes were was not as bad as I thought it would be. I only had to stop and wait for him to catch up twice, which was really saying something since I know I am normally super fast as a wolf. It was probably the fact that he ran through the woods during his cross country runs. The only annoying part was how much noise he made. I hadn't really realized how loud humans are when we move until then. When we finally reached the trees, I immediately shifted back and began putting my clothes back on. Out of the corner of my eye I saw John look down at the remains of his clothing.

"What am I going to do?" he asked. I wasn't sure if he was talking to me or to himself but I figured I would answer him anyway, since I was only one who could possibly help him out at that time.

"If you give me a sec to get dressed then I'll run and grab you some clothes." I said as I hooked the back of my bra together.

"Okay." He said. I slipped my shirt on over my head but I could feel his eyes on me, staring at me. Even though the only bare skin he could see now was that on my legs, the fact that he was watching me put my clothes back on made me uncomfortable. I snatched my jeans from the forest floor and shook the dead leaves off of them. "How do you do it?" he asked, still watching me curiously.

"Do what? Put on clothes?" I looked up at him and smiled, "It's easy. All you have to do is stick your right leg through one hole and your left through the other." John shook his head, his dark hair ruffling a bit as he did. It reminded me of the impenetrable, jet-black color of his fur.

"No, no." he said, "I mean, how do you change back and forth so easily?"

"Oh. Well, I've been doing it for a long time." I shot him another smile as I pulled my jeans up around my hips and buttoned them. I grabbed my jacket and said, "Alright, now stay here. I'll be back with some clothes for you." He nodded and sat down with his back against the twin trees. He wrapped his arms around his bare body and let loose a slight shiver. "I'll be quick." I added and then ran out to the parking lot beside the school. I didn't know how much time had passed but I was praying that the front doors would still be open.

"Marina!" I heard my name called out across the parking lot by a voice I knew all too well. I was only about 50 feet from the school entrance but I stopped. I was so stupid. How could I have forgotten about my mother? I slowly turned around. Sure enough, there she was, standing outside our red SUV with her arms crossed over her chest. "Where have you been?" she asked while glaring at me, "I've been waiting here and calling you for the last twenty minutes." I reached into my jacket pocket and pulled out my cell phone. There were five missed calls from "Mom Cell".

"Mom, I'm really sorry, but I've had a bit of an emergency." I told her.

"Emergency?" her eyes widened in fear, "What's wrong? Is someone hurt? Why didn't you call me?" I immediately realized the mistake of my poor word choice.

"No, no." I said, shaking my head, "no one's hurt. It's aâ€¢" I looked at her significantly, "that kind of problem." I couldn't flat out say shapeshifter in the middle of the school parking lot, there were still a couple parents and kids waiting around.

"Oh, umm, okay. I guess I'll wait here?" she said uncertainly. I nodded and then turned to head back into the school. "Marina, wait!"

"What?" I asked, swiveling my head back around.

"Where's John?"

"Umm, I'll explain later, but he's kind of part of the problem." I

said. Well, actually he was the entire problem but she didn't have to know that, or at least not yet. My mom raised her eyebrows at me but I dismissed her and ran towards the front doors again. I sprinted down the main hallway, ignoring the crazy looks I got from the students who were still sitting and chatting or were waiting for a meeting to start. I burst into the girls' locker room and found my locker where I kept my t-shirt and shorts for gym class. It took me three tries to get the combination right because I was in such a hurry, but I finally heard it click open and I grabbed the clothes inside. I knew they would be small on John, but it would be better than him walking across the parking lot and getting in the car with my mom completely naked. I raced back outside with the clothes in hand. My mom watched me as I ran. "Be right back." I said as I ran past her. She didn't respond, but then again, I didn't really give her a chance to.

John was exactly where I had left him. "Here." I said holding my small t-shirt and light blue shorts out to him. He looked up at me.

"Your gym clothes?" he said with his eyebrows raised, "those aren't going to fit me."

"Well, this is all you've got. So, unless you wanna get arrested for public nudity, I suggest you put them on." He glanced skeptically at the clothes in my hand but took them from me. He stood up and I didn't bother turning around, he hadn't when I had gotten dressed. He pulled the shorts on first. I couldn't help but laugh because they were definitely too tight. He shot me a look, telling me to cut it out. I bit my lip to keep from laughing again. He lifted his arms to pull the t-shirt over his head and I found myself unintentionally staring at the flexing muscles in his arms and chest. I looked away as soon as he pulled the collar of his shirt down past his eyes. The t-shirt wasn't as bad as the shorts, but it was still pretty tight. "Come on, maybe if we're quick no one will notice that you're wearing my clothes."

"There are still people out there?" John's eyes shifted through the increasingly sparing trees. If he had had to wear my clothes for any reason other than turning into a wolf I knew he wouldn't have cared if people saw him dressed the way he was. But I was sure that because this was a secret he didn't want anyone to know or even be curious of, he was very afraid of being seen. I knew I would be too. It had happened to me before.

When I was ten I had a habit of sleepwalking. Well, it was more like sleep-shifting. There were a couple of times where I would wake up to find myself naked on the forest floor about a mile from my house. The first time it happened I completely freaked out and didn't even think about people seeing me. I was so afraid of being in the woods alone that I simply ran home, but not before a cop saw me and picked me up off the dawn streaked street. Let's just say there were a lot of questions for me and my parents when I arrived home that morning. Thankfully, the cop believed our story about me sleepwalking. I had been smart enough to "recall" that I had been dreaming about going swimming in the stream in the woods. My dad told me that if it ever happened again to just shift back and make my way home that way. When I woke up amongst the dirt and dead leaves three more times, my parents decided that they had to do something else to stop me from sleep-shifting and leaving the house. My dad decided take me on a

walk in my wolf form every day, in an attempt to "get it out of my system", and my mom installed a gate in front of my door which she locked every night to keep me from getting out. Finally, after a year of waking up cold and naked, I stopped sleep-shifting. Whether I grew out of it, or my parents' techniques actually worked, I don't know. I'm just thankful that I stopped doing it.

John and I came to the clearing in front of the parking lot. Thankfully, there were only two cars waiting in front of the school. I immediately saw my mom's SUV, discovering that she had moved it so it was closer to the woods that I had disappeared into when I ran past her a few minutes ago. It was one of those times where I was never so happy to have a mom who, not only knew about her family's ability to shapeshift, but who was also able to understand it. John and I practically ran to the car and slid in across the backseat. We buckled our seatbelts and my mom drove away, not even bothering to comment on John's choice of wardrobe. Only when we were on the road, away from the school, did she speak.

"Marina," she said in her condescending motherly tone, "what is going on?" I looked over to John and he looked at me. The eye contact did not go unnoticed by my mom who was watching the two of us in her rearview mirror. Staring at me, she asked, "Does he know? Did you tell him?"

"Umm, yes and not exactly." My mom's eyes darted to John and then back to me.

"What do you mean 'not exactly'?"

"John knows that I am a shapeshifter because I showed him butâ€œ" I didn't get a chance to finish my sentence.

"Marina!" My mom scolded, "How could you? You know you are not supposed to tell people about us!"

"Mom! Relax!" I said quickly before she could yell at me some more, "I only showed him because he's a shapeshifter too." She froze. Again, her eyes moved to John in the seat next to me. He didn't say anything. He shifted uncomfortably in the leather seat. "But he didn't know it. He only started shifting since he turned fifteen, which was a few days ago." My mom nodded and looked back at me. I knew that she understood the gravity of the situation.

"I'm going to call your father and tell him to meet us at home." She said as she pulled her cell phone out of her purse, "John, I suggest you call your parents and tell them that you're going to be staying at our house for dinner."

"Umm, okay." John said and he too pulled out his cell phone. What he didn't know was that we probably weren't going to have time for dinner.

## 5. Suspicions

Hey guys! Sorry for the gap between chapters but I've been super busy with homework and such. Anyway, thanks so much for the great

reviews! You guys are great! \_

\_And just as a clarification, for right now, I am switching back and forth between the past and the present with each chapter. So, for example, the last chapter was in the past and this one is in the present. Basically, any chapters with Bella in them are the present while the ones with Marina and Jet in the woods/finding out about each other as shapeshifters are the past.\_

\_Hope you enjoy reading this chapter!\_

Bella wasn't in a farther bathroom either. Something had clearly been wrong, but where had she run off to? As I walked back to chemistry, I even made sure I looked in the windows on the doors of each of the classrooms. I got a lot of funny looks from the students and teachers who noticed me peeking in their classrooms. But I still couldn't find her. When I walked back into my chem class, everyone stopped what they were doing and stared at me. Even Mrs. Allen stopped her work with the group up front and looked at me.

"Is Bella okay?" She asked. I quickly glanced around at all the eyes on me. I hadn't found Bella, but something in my gut was telling me that they didn't need to know that.

"Yeah, she's just not feeling too well." I lied and moved away from the door back to my seat. Jet gave me a look that told me he knew I was lying. I didn't know how, but it was like he had a lie detector installed in his brain that only worked on me. No matter what I did he always knew when I was lying. I purposely ignored him and continued with the lab. Peter and Jet had already cleaned up the spilled water. I could still feel Jet's eyes on me as I poured the liquid past the meniscus two times. I have to say it is very difficult to think about acidic, basic, and pH levels when you have a really hot guy staring at you.

"What's going on?" Jet whispered as soon as Peter turned away from the table. I didn't answer him, mostly because I didn't know what was going on. "Mar, seriouslyâ€"" but he didn't have to finish his sentence because the door opened and Bella walked back in. Again, the room hushed, but this time people were kind enough to at least pretend they weren't watching Bella walk across the room.

"Are you feeling better, Bella?" Mrs. Allen asked. If Bella was surprised or confused by our teacher's question, she didn't show it.

"Oh yeah. I'm much better now, thanks." She said and took her seat across from me once more as if nothing had happened. She didn't look at me for the rest of the period, while Jet couldn't seem to decide whether he should watch me or watch Bella. The three of us were dead silent as we waited for the minutes on the clock to run down. The only person who did talk was Peter, and that was to apologize to Bella again and to read the remaining steps of the procedure. I still didn't say anything to Bella when chem was over and the three of us were walking down to the gym together. Reaching the doors that led to the boys and girls locker rooms, Bella and I separated from Jet. Bella followed me to my locker and slumped against the row beside it as I pulled out my gym clothes. I knew that because it was her first day she wouldn't have clothes or a locker yet, and in that I saw my opportunity.

"Soâ€|" I began slowly, "what happened to you last period?" Bella looked down at me.

"I got really nauseas all of a sudden." She said.

"I checked the bathrooms but you weren't there." I said casually. I didn't want to sound like I was accusing her of something, even though I did feel a bit suspicious that she wasn't telling the truth.

"Oh, I needed some air is all, so I went outside." She smiled and gestured to the door. I looked up at her and nodded as I pulled my sneakers on my feet. "Thanks for telling Mrs. Allen that I felt sick."

"No problem." I smiled back at her, "come on, let's go watch the freshmen try to flirt with Jet." She raised her eyebrows in skepticism. I laughed, "trust me, it's hilarious." We began to walk out of the locker room.

"How so?" she giggled. I was pretty sure she could imagine exactly how funny it would be to watch the girls two years younger than us think they have a chance with a guy like Jet, but I humored her.

"Well, it kind of looks like thisâ€|" I said and began frantically batting my eyelashes at her and twirling a piece of my hair around my index finger. "Oh Bella," I said, mocking the ditzy girls, "you're so strong."

"Why thank you." Bella said, procuring a "sexy" man voice that sounded more like the man from the Old Spice commercials than Jet. I let out a high-pitched giggle as we walked over to the rest of our class.

"Bella, you are too funny!" I half-shrieked. Then we both burst out laughing.

"What are you two laughing about?" Jet smiled as he walked up to us. Bella and I exchanged a look then continued to laugh. "What?"

"Just doing some imitations." I told him.

When last period came around, Jet and I headed off to study hall while Bella went to find her English class. Jet and I worked on our algebra homework for most of the period. As soon as we finished the last problem, he brought up what happened with Bella in chemistry earlier, as I knew he would. I told him exactly what Bella told me.

"But you think there's something else going on, don't you?" he asked, watching my face. Damn it, I thought. Why did he have to be so good at reading me?

"No." I said, giving him a "I-think-you're-crazy" look to be a bit more convincing. He didn't fall for it.

"Marinaâ€|" he said, throwing a "I-know-you're-lying" look back at me. I sighed and rolled my eyes at him.

"Fine," I said, "I just can't seem to shake the suspicion that she ran out of the room because Peter spilled the water on her. Which wouldn't be a big deal, except she completely disappeared and when she came back she was completely dry. Did you notice that?"

"No, but that's a good point." He nodded, then whispered, "Do you think she could be a shapeshifter too? Maybe a sea creature like you?"

"Nah, it's not like water makes me shift." I said. The conversation seemed to die with my comment. After a couple of minutes, he asked,

"So, are we hiking after school like normal?" Hiking was our code word for shifting and exploring the forest.

"Umm, I can't." I lied, hoping he wouldn't catch me for once in my life, "I have too much homework."

"Homework?" he asked, "We just finished our math and we only have a little bit of chem, how much more do you have? And since when has that ever stopped you? You've never missed an opportunity to shapeshift."

"I just have a lot of work, okay?" I said in a tone that told him I didn't want to talk about it. Thankfully, he took the hint and didn't push the subject. He was right though, I never did pass up an opportunity to turn. What he didn't know was that I wasn't passing up an opportunity. I am always able to shift into my wolf form, but I almost never get a chance to shift into my dolphin form. One of my father's rules was that we never go out alone. Whenever we shift we have to make sure someone else comes with this. This rule is kind of hard to follow when you're the only shapeshifter who can turn into a marine animal. So, needless to say, I don't get very many chances to swim in my dolphin form. I usually have to sneak around to do so, which was exactly what I was planning for that afternoon. I hadn't been out in the ocean for over a month and I was dying to swim, even if it meant breaking the rules.

Jet glanced up at me from the book he had taken out of his backpack. I couldn't tell if he knew I was planning something other than homework for the afternoon or not. It wasn't that I didn't trust Jet to not tell my parents, it was just that I knew that he would try to convince me not to go because he's afraid I'll get hurt. I know he's just looking out for me, but I have an older brother, a father and a mother who do that. It's sweet that he cares, but the whole "protectiveness" is unnecessary. When I looked over to him, I found him still staring at me. I quickly looked away again and buried my head in my chemistry textbook as far down as it would go.

## 6. The Family

I could tell that John was more than a little nervous about meeting with my father. His eyes kept glancing over at the woods that surrounded my houseâ€"scanning the tree line as if he expected to see my father as his cougar form watching as we approached the house. I nudged his shoulder, trying to relieve his tension, and he gave me an uneasy smile in return. I immediately realized that any small playful

reassurance on my part wasn't going to decrease his anxiety. When I walked through the back door that led to our kitchen, I was immediately bombarded with questions.

"Where have you been?" my younger sister, Skye, asked as she stood up from her seat at the kitchen table.

"And do you have any idea what Dad is doing home already?" my older brother, Cole, asked pulling his head out of the fridge.

"Did you forget that Thursday's one of our shifting daâ€"?" Skye immediately stopped talking when she noticed that John was behind me. "I mean, our- ourâ€"?" Skye stumbled to find a replacement word and then turned away from John and I. Cole laughed.

"Smooth." He said as he grabbed a Gatorade and closed the fridge with his foot.

"Where's Dad?" I asked them.

"He's in the shed out back," Cole answered, "what's going on?"

"Ummâ€|" I didn't know if it was my place to reveal John's secret, "we just need toâ€"?" I didn't get to finish my lie because John cut me off.

"I'm a shapeshifter too." He said confidently to my siblingsâ€"something that probably very difficult for him considering he had only learned that himself about half an hour ago. Cole and Skye stopped what they were doing and just stared at him with their mouths hanging open.

"What are you?" Cole asked, recovering from his momentary shock.

"A black wolf." John said, then countered, "What are you?" Cole glanced at me, silently asking me if I thought he should tell John. We had all been raised to not tell a soul about being shapeshifters, let alone what animal, or in my case animals, we are. I nodded to himâ€"John had just revealed what he wasâ€"it was only fair. Cole raised his eyebrows and smiled mischievously at John. I knew from his expression that he was hoping to intimidate John.

"A tiger." I didn't think John was intimidated but he was definitely surprised. Cole walked past us and out the door running out towards the woodsâ€"probably to show off. Turning to Skye, John asked,

"Andâ€|you?" He was a bit more hesitant with his question towards Skye, as if he was afraid she was going to tell him she was a dragon. She looked up at him from her homework at the table.

"An owl." She told him. I could tell that he was a bit more impressed with Skye than Cole.

"Come on," I said, pulling John back outside, "we have to talk to my Dad." We walked out the door into the backyard, towards the shed. Pacing just inside the tree line was Cole in his tiger form, watching us. I purposely ignored him, but that was a bit more difficult for John to doâ€"he was still new to the whole idea of shapeshifters and,

even though he probably didn't want to be, he was intrigued by Cole.

"Are there usually some many different animals in families of shapeshifters?" John asked me, "I guess I mean, is what animal you turn into genetic?"

"I don't think so," I said, "Sometimes certain animals are more common, but just because my dad's a mountain lion didn't mean that I would be a mountain lion."

"Is a wolf a common animal?" he asked, stepping up beside me.

"Umm, I guess. If I had to pick one it would be the wolf. All those werewolf stories have to come from somewhere right?" I said and smiled at him. He gave me a quick smile back before jumping to his next question.

"What are some rare animals then?"

"Birds, marine animalsâ€¦ basically anything that humans have less in common with."

"So your sister is considered to be rare amongst other shapeshifters because she can turn into an owl?"

"Yes and no." He looked at me funny.

"What do you mean?"

"Yes, Skye would be considered rare because she can turn into an animal that can fly, but also no, becauseâ€¦ well, I actually don't know any shapeshifters outside my family."

"Really?" I noddedâ€"able to tell that he was actually surprised by this.

"Did you expect to be joining some sort of large cult or something?" I laughed. He smiled sheepishlyâ€"something that looked out of place on his handsome face.

"A little." We both laughed. But he immediately stopped when we reached the shed. The white wooden door was cracked slightly, and I could see my father inside working on a new bench for our patio. For as long as I can remember my dad has always been working on something in his "woodshop". He built and carved my bed frame, my sister's dresser, and even our kitchen table and chairs. However, it occurred to me that seeing my dad with a saw might make him seem more intimidating to John, especially since he just found out my dad is also a powerful mountain lion.

"Come on," I said. I took his hand and smiled in support. He tried to smile back at me but it looked more like a grimace. I gently pulled him inside. My dad looked up from his work when we entered.

"Hi, sweetie," he said, as if it was any other day, "how was school?"

"Same old, same old." I told him.

"And how are you John?" he asked, turning his attention to my friend.

"O-kay," he said. I glanced between him and my dad.

"Really?" My dad raised his eyebrows, "well, I'm impressed. I know I wouldn't be okay if I was in your situation." I laughed with my dad, knowing he was trying to relieve the tension. John joined in after a few seconds. Once the laughter died down, my dad said, "So tell me, John, what seems to be your problem?" John glanced at me before looking back at my dad.

"I can't control when I shift." He said, clearly a bit embarrassed that the wolf inside was controlling him. My dad nodded as if he understood, even though I knew he had been taught to shift at a young age by his father just as I had by him.

"And this started a few days ago?"

"Yeah, right after I turned 15." My dad nodded again.

"Happy belated birthday." He said.

"Thanks." John grumbled. He obviously didn't think learning he was a shapeshifter with no control was a very good present. It was weird for me to see him like this. I was so used to him being confident, and sometimes even cocky. But now he seemed unsure, vulnerable, and maybe even scared. I had a strong urge to throw my arms around him and tell him that everything would in fact be okay.

"Don't worry." My dad said, sensing the same thing.

"You can make it stop?" John asked him, lifting his head a bit.

"No, but I can't help you to control your changes." My dad told him.

"How?"

"Practice, mostly. And you have to be willing to shift." John pursed his lips but nodded.

"When can we get started?" he asked, looking more eager now. My dad set down his tools and brushed his hands on his jeans.

"Right now. But let's get you out of my daughter's clothes first." He laughed as he looked at the tight t-shirt and shorts that John was still wearing. The three of us walked out of the shed with my dad in the lead. "Cole!" My dad yelled to the tiger still pacing just inside the trees, "Get in the house and find John a pair of shorts he can wear for training!" The great, orange and black striped tiger that was my brother, sleeked forward. He shifted back into human form just before entering the house and we followed him inside. While John waited to Cole to come back down with a pair of old shorts for him, I ran up to my room and changed into the old, dirty, and partially shredded dress that I always wore when I knew I would be most likely be shifting multiple times. I pulled my dark hair out of my high ponytail, shaking it loose around the curves of my face, and ran back downstairs. When I reached the kitchen again, John was already dressed in a pair of Cole's old khaki shorts. And for a second time

that day I found myself presented with the beauty of John's muscular chest. When my father joined us again, I quickly looked away, feeling my cheeks heat up a bit in embarrassment. I hadn't realized that I was staring at John's bare chest. Thankfully, no one noticed me because in the next second John got the same panicked look on his face that I had seen in the office at school.

"Oh no." He said before he dashed out the back door again, my dad and I right behind him. And so it begins, I thought.

## 7. Swimming

After school, I rushed out to my red Jeep, trying to seem as inconspicuous as possible. Not only did I not want Jet to become even more suspicious, but I didn't want to run into Cole either and have him asking questions. If Jet knew what I was up to, he would insist on coming with me, which would limit where I could go. He may be a strong swimmer but he could never be as good as a dolphin. Cole, on the other hand, wouldn't even let me go. He would threaten to bring my dad into the situation if I refused to go home with him. He may be a bit big-headed, but he was more over-protective of me than anything. I might have been going a bit overboard but, I even pulled the navy blue Chargers hat I stole from Jet months ago over my long, dark hair hoping to make myself less noticeable. I quickly hopped into my Jeep, throwing my bag in the backseat and putting the key in the ignition. I spotted Cole coming out the side door of the building with a bunch of other seniors. I pulled out of the parking lot, reeling in the success of my escape. Even if Cole did see my car leaving, he couldn't follow nor did he know where I was going. Both Cole and Skye would probably think I was with Jet when they both got home and realized I wasn't there. While Jet would think I was at home with tons of homework hopefully.

I got on the highway, heading towards the beach. But when I reached the exit that would take me to all the public beaches about five minutes later, I passed by it and left the highway at the next exit instead. I took the first left, travelling down a hidden, sandy road. My jeep bumped and rattled as I continued down the road. I knew the dirt road was about five miles long, with a large painted rock from the sixties marking the halfway point. My phone rang, flashing Cole's name, as I passed the rainbow on the rock but I ignored it. A couple minutes later I pulled my car off to the side of the road and into a small alcove. I locked my car, grabbed my backpack, which I had snuck a towel inside earlier that morning, and walked down to the half-hidden wooden steps that led down to a small beach surrounded by trees. No one knew this beach even existed, and, if they did, they would have a really hard time finding it. I looked out across the water to make sure there were no boats that could possibly see me. Thankfully there weren't. I was much too eager to get in the water again and didn't feel like waiting for any boats to get out of sight. I quickly undressed and stashed my clothes in my backpack, hiding it behind a bush on the edge of the trees.

I walked forward until the water hit my feet, testing the temperature. It wasn't bad, just warm enough, as it always is during the spring. It had been a long time—too long—since I had gotten the opportunity to sneak away to the ocean and shift. I had been to the beach only last weekend, but I hadn't been alone. Jet and I spent the day on one of the public beaches with Annie, Connor, Grace, and

Tommy. It would have been a nice dayâ€"had the ocean not been mocking me all dayâ€"the waves rolling in and out, torturing my bare feet. While Annie and Grace kicked at the water out of fun, trying to splash each other, I kicked at the water in frustration. I'm sure Annie, Grace, Connor and Tommy probably thought I was PMSing. Only Jet knew what my problem really was. Three times I found myself standing alone at the water's edge, the urge to dive under and not come back up so strong that I felt my resistance waning like the incoming waves. It never took long for Jet to stand beside me and grip my hand, squeezing it gently. He didn't say anythingâ€"he could already guess what I was thinkingâ€"he simply stood there until he decided we should probably rejoin our friends and turned away, pulling me with him.

But today was not like last weekend. I didn't have to be angry or worried about anything. There was no reason for Jet to be here to comfort me or ease my pain. Today, watching the drifting waves, all I could do was smile. I waded in up to my waist before I stopped and waited for a large wave to come towards me. When one big enough to go over my head approached, I prepared myself and then gracefully dove under the water, shifting into my dolphin form as I felt the wave roll against my back. It didn't take me more than a few seconds to remember how to use my tail. I swam about five hundred feet away from the shore, relishing in the feeling of the water against my smooth, gray skin before I surfaced. Smiling to myself, I dove back under and swam towards my favorite, and probably the most beautiful, spot on the coast of California.

I passed by the public beachesâ€"making sure I was far enough out to not run into any swimmers or surfers. I only had to make that mistake once to know not to go so close again. Originally, I thought it would be nice to give people that once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to swim in the ocean with a dolphin, but being surrounded by a large amount of people (who were mainly tourists) was quite frightening. Not only that, but there were a few locals who realized that coming close to the people by the shore was not normal behavior for a wild dolphin and they reported me to the local marine habilitation center. Being friendly with many of the workers there, my dad heard about the extremely sociable, wild dolphin and quickly put two and two together. Needless to say, I got in big trouble. From then on, I have always made sure that I was at least a hundred feet away from farthest out swimmer or surfer. However, this never stopped me from making sure I was seen on shore. Today, I surfaced more than I needed to. I liked how excited the people (especially the tourists) got at the sight of me. There were always a bunch of kids who would jump up and point at me, yelling at their families to look too. Sometimes this even caused a small crowd to gather and watch as I slowly swam by them out in the deep water. Since it had been so long since I had gotten the chance to swim, I figured it wouldn't hurt to put on a bit of a show for the people watching on the beach. As I swam by I jumped out of the water a few times, listening for the animated chatter of my audience.

After about five out-of-water jumps, I decided that the show should probably be over before things started to look suspicious again. I swam away from the shore and towards my favorite spot again. I glided through the water as I approached the outer edges of the popular marine area. But then something ahead of me caught my eye. I couldn't tell what it was, but it moved like a dolphin so I wasn't afraid of it being a shark. Perhaps it was a lone dolphin? I wasn't afraid of

other dolphins, especially if they were alone. I slowly swam towards the creature that had its back to me. As I got closer, I quickly realized it wasn't a dolphin--it looked like it had scales. I moved forward a bit more and immediately stopped. At first, I thought my eyes were deceiving me, but they weren't. The creature in front of me had a long scaly tail, two arms and a full head of light hair--a mermaid. I was seeing a mermaid. Mermaids didn't exist. But, technically, neither do shapeshifters, I thought. She stopped swimming, but I turned away from her and raced away, back towards my secret beach.

When the water got to be only about five feet deep, I shifted back into my human form and walked through the water to the shore. I was so preoccupied by thoughts of what I had just seen that I didn't even realize there was someone sitting on the sand with my backpack next to him. I started when I finally looked up, the breaking waves nipping at my ankles, and noticed Jet sitting there in only a pair of khaki cargo shorts with my towel in his lap. He smiled at me and I sighed, rolling my eyes slightly.

"How'd you know I was here?" I asked as I squeezed the excess salt water out of my long hair.

"Homework? Come on, Mar. Don't you think I know you better than that by now?" He said and raised his eyebrows at me. Standing up he handed me the beach towel.

"Thanks." I said as I took it and wrapped it around my body. "Do you always know when I'm lying?"

"Pretty much." He said and shot me another swoon-worthy grin. I glared at him then began to dry myself off. When I was basically dry, I threw the towel back at him and got dressed again. We walked up the wooden steps to my Jeep together. When I noticed that his truck wasn't parked next to my car, I asked,

"How'd you get here?" He looked at me significantly and raised his eyebrows again. I stared at him, only then actually realizing how he was only wearing a pair of torn shorts--no shoes, no shirt.

"Oh, right." I mumbled.

"So, how was your swim?" he asked, then added, "I wish you would have let me come with you."

"You wouldn't have been able to swim that far," I said, recalling my trip to my favorite spot. But then I remembered that I didn't get to actually explore the area because of the mermaid I saw. I stopped walking and Jet stopped too, looking back at me, confused.

"Mar? What is it?" he asked.

"I saw a mermaid." I whispered.

"What?"

"I saw a mermaid." I said more clearly.

"Mar, mermaids don't ex--"

"Exist, I know," I nodded, "but neither do we, right?"

"It was probably just some large fish or something." He said, shrugging. I shook my head.

"It was a mermaid. I know what I saw." I said, looking up at him. He didn't say anything. I turned around and stared out at the open water.

3

#### 8. Jet

John didn't even make it to the woods. He dropped to knees, for the second time that day, his fingers grasping at the soft, green grass below him, and began shaking. His spasms came out in spurts, as if he was trying to keep his body from shifting. I dropped down next to him, resting my hand gently against his back. His breathing slowed for a minute before he began gasping for air again. He was trying to resistâ€"trying to force his body to remain in this shapeâ€"and, for a moment, it seemed as if he might actually succeed.

"Marina, back away from him," my dad said to me firmly and I immediately scooted back about three feet. "John, listen to me. Don't try to stop it. Don't resist. You need to let it happen. Let your body shift."

"Butâ€"I think Iâ€"" John gasped. My dad interrupted him,

"No. Your body still needs to get used to the feeling of shifting." John nodded painfully, and then stopped fighting the change. His body shuddered, and, in the next minute, the black wolf I had first seen in the woods only a few hours before stood in my backyard. I couldn't help but smile. My friend was just like meâ€"well, almost just like me. Although, who knows? Maybe John was secretly a marine animal too.

"Come on," I said, pulling my dress over my head, "let's go for a run." I shifted into my wolf form and dashed towards the woods. I could hear John right behind me.

"Wait!" My dad called after us. I looked back, afraid he was going to tell us that we couldn't goâ€"that John had to stay and continue shifting back and forth. "Take the three mile loop," he said, and then gesturing to John, added, "He stills needs to get some practice in before it gets dark." I nodded to show him that I understood and then disappeared into the trees.

I ran on the path for awhileâ€"making sure John was able to keep up with me. He wasâ€"with ease. I tried not to be jealous of this. I had always prided myself on being the fastest out of my dad and Cole, but I guess it made sense for John to be as fast as meâ€"as fast, he could never be fasterâ€"I wouldn't allow it. I decided to test him. I wanted to see if he could maintain his speed while having to navigate through the dense forest. Taking a sharp left, I strayed from the worn path. John fell behind at firstâ€"not expecting the sudden changeâ€"but he quickly looped back around and was on my heels once more. I darted in and out of the trees, never slowing down. I have to admit I was slightly disappointed when I noticed that John was

keeping up with meâ€"it looked like it was almost easy for him. I sped up, but he matched my pace. The trees began to thin again, and the next thing I knew he was running alongside me. He turned his head toward me and gave me this look that could have only meant "Is this the best you can do?" He grinned at me before he sped up, pulling ahead of me. I let him go ahead until he was about ten feet in front of me. Then I increased my speedâ€"slowly gaining on him. He sensed me catching up and ran faster, but I continued to close the distance between us. As soon as I was right behind him, I cut to the side to pull ahead, but he too moved to the right. I moved to the left instead, but he blocked me again. I let out a soft growl in annoyance. He snorted, chucklingâ€"he was laughing at me. I growled at him again and tried to get past but he wouldn't let me. Reaching my head forward, I took a few snaps at his hind legs. That startled him enough for me to be able to run around the side next to him.

We continued to race through the woods until we came out into the clearing that was my backyard once more. John stopped short when he realized how fast we had ended up back there. My dad was sitting on the back porch, waiting for us.

"That was fast," he said, eyeing me suspiciously. I smiled to myself and looked awayâ€"he didn't have to know that we raced the whole trail. My dad stood up and walked over to the two of us. Looking down at John, he said, "And now the real training begins." John-the-wolf sat obedientlyâ€"as if he was some pet and this was simply a doggy school program. I snorted and he shot me an evil look. I trotted over to the porch to lie in the sunâ€"still mocking him. "What I need you to do first, John, is shift back." I knew he was still watching me. "John? Are you listening to me?" my dad asked. John wasn'tâ€"his eyes were still locked on me. I shot him a look that told him "you-better-pay-attention". His head snapped up in the direction of my dad's face. Even from behind him, I knew my dad had his eyebrows raised in his typical amused expression. I watched as John's near-military stance slumped a little. I snorted again.

"Marina, go in the house please," my dad said, not turning around. I immediately shifted back into my human form.

"Dadâ€" "

"Go, Marina," he said firmly.

"Dad, I can help," I said, stepping forward.

"I think you're doing more hurt than help right now."

"And how's that?" I asked.

"You're distracting him," my dad said simply. John's cheeks reddened and he looked away from me.

"Fine." I pouted. I grabbed my dress off the ground and stomped inside. I pulled it over my head as I walked through the kitchen and up the stairs to my bedroom. I went straight to my window, which looked out across the backyard. From there, I watched as my dad coached John through multiple changes. I could tell that John had a lot of difficulty shifting between his human form and his wolf form, but after the first three times it seemed to be getting easier for him. Even from the window I was able to see how natural his shifts

were becoming. After about an hour, it looked like John's practice with shifting was over. My dad talked to him for a few minutes before he walked away, back towards the house. I raced down the stairs and almost ran into my dad in the kitchen. I didn't say anything—just looked at him before dashing outside to John. I found him still standing in the middle of the yard, staring out at the surrounding trees. I noticed he was wearing another pair of Cole's old shorts.

"Hey," I said as I approached him.

"Hey," was all he said back. He didn't look at me as I came to stand beside him.

"How do you feel?" I asked. He shrugged.

"Alright, I guess. Kind of tired."

"Do you think you're in control now?"

"Don't know. I hope so," he paused, "your dad said I'm going to need to practice more to make sure." I nodded in understanding. "I saw you watching from the window," he said, this time glancing over at me. It was my turn for my cheeks to redden. I looked at the ground.

"Sorry."

"It's okay. It may sound crazy, but I think I did better knowing you were watching me," he said.

"Really?" I asked. He smiled and nodded.

The slamming of the back door interrupted our moment, causing both of us to jump. It was Cole. As soon as he stepped off the porch he shifted into his massive tiger form. I assumed he would head for the woods but instead he came towards us—his eyes locked on John.

"Cole, what are you doing?" I asked, but Cole ignored me. He just continued to stalk towards John. John took a few steps back. The next couple seconds were a blur—Cole pounced and John dove to the side, landing on the ground a few feet away from where he stood before.

"Cole!" I shouted, but he still paid me no attention. Cole pounced again and John jumped aside—this time shifting into his wolf form as he did. Cole smiled as he circled the black wolf. John stood his ground—even letting out a small growl directed at Cole.

"Cole! Stop it!" I yelled. Cole pounced at John again and again but John avoided him every time. He moved so fast that all I saw was a stream of jet black fur. I didn't understand what Cole was doing, but the next thing I knew he had lunged at me. Before I even got the chance to jump away or shift, the jet black blur collided with the tiger—knocking Cole to the ground. Cole stood up and shifted back into his human form. He was smiling.

"Cole! What the hell did you think you were doing?" I said.

"My own type of training," he said, "if he's going to be one of us then I had to make sure he had the skills and agility to protect himself and you." John shifted back too. The two boys stared at each other. John nodded to Cole, showing him that he understood what he was getting at.

"I can protect myself thank you very much." Neither my brother nor John acknowledged my comment. Cole turned and walked back into the house. When he disappeared inside I turned to face John, raising my eyebrows and crossing my arms over my chest.

"What?" John asked. Smiling at him, I said,

"Those were some moves, Jet."

## 9. Footprints

Just so everyone knows, the chapter before this one was my last flashback chapter. All the chapters after that one will be in the present. Hope you enjoy!

"You sure you don't want to go for a run?" Jet asked, raising his eyebrows, "first one to the edge of Hollister Avenue?" I threw my backpack in the back seat of my Jeep and sighed.

"I told you I can't, Jet," I said, "I actually have to get homework done now." I opened the driver's side door and began dusting the sand off my feet. And do a little research on mermaids, but I couldn't tell Jet that. I knew he didn't believe that I saw a mermaid. It didn't matter though, cause I was going to prove it to him.

"Yeah, you already told me what you have to do, but what do you want to do?" He asked as he took a few steps closer to me. I stared out at the trees, pursing my lips. He stopped about two feet away from me, waiting for an answer. Could I put off my work for another hour or two? Should I go with Jet? He was rightâ€"I did want to go.

I turned towards him and found myself face toâ€|well, chest. I was a little taken aback by the proximity of his half-naked body. When did he get so muscular? But the better question was why did I care? Jet and I were just friends, we always have been. I forced my eyes to look at his face instead of his chest, trying to seem as innocent as possible. Of course, Jet was watching me curiously. Damn it. He had definitely caught me staring at him. I could feel my cheeks heat up and I quickly looked away from him and back to the forest.

"Fine," I said reluctantly, "but just a quick one." Jet shot me a cocky grin as I shut the car door again. I pulled my shirt up over my head and threw it through the open window. I unbuttoned my jean shorts and wiggled out of them, letting them drop down to my ankles. I picked my shorts up and placed them on the seat with my shirt. Glancing up, I noticed Jet watching me as he unbuttoned his own pants. I smiled to myself. "You just want to see me naked again." The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. My smile disappeared. I froze. Had I really just said that? I sneaked a peek at Jet, his hands were frozen on the waist of his pants and his eyes were locked on meâ€"wide with shock. He looked just as awkward and scared as I felt.

Hiding my face, I turned my back to him. I cringedâ€"I couldn't believe I actually said that. I wasn't sure if he was watching me, but I quickly took off my bra and underwear again and shifted into my wolf form. When I turned back around, the familiar black wolf stood before me. Jet gave me a soft smile and nodded his head towards the forestâ€"letting me lead the way. He didn't have to tell me twice.

I dashed offâ€"wanting nothing more than to feel the weightless bliss of running through the tall treesâ€"my second home. I ran faster than I had ever run before, hoping that I could outrun the awkward situation I had inadvertently created back by my Jeep. I could hear the familiar padded steps of Jet behind me. I wondered what he was thinking about. Probably concentrating on where he was goingâ€"something I should have been doingâ€"I was slowing down and he would catch up soon.

Sure enough, the mass of black fur easily passed by me, pulling ahead, in the next few seconds. I pushed forward, trying to get in front of him again, but like he always did, he blocked my path. I cut left but he was thereâ€"our usual game. I tried to psych him outâ€"go right then quickly dart to the left againâ€"but he didn't fall for it. I growled. Fine. If he was going to be like that then I could play dirty too. I began snapping at his back ankles. The move shouldn't have caught him off guardâ€"I had done it plenty of times beforeâ€"but for some reason, this time was different. When I nipped his ankles he stumbled, tripping over his own feet. He tumbled down and I narrowly avoided him by jumping over his body. I watched him roll off a cliff and disappear before I collided with the nearest tree truck and fell to the ground. I shook my headâ€"trying to clear itâ€"and jumped up. I ran over to the cliff and looked down. I shifted back into my human form.

"Jet!" I called, the worry in my voice echoing across the small canyon. He lay at the bottom, in a pile of dead leaves, unmoving. "Jet!" I shifted back into a wolf and carefully made my way to the bottom of the canyon. It was actually a very pretty areaâ€"the forest was less dense and there was a small brook that ran through the middle. When I was finally safe on the bottom, I shifted again and raced over to Jet.

There was a large gash in his sideâ€"most likely where a sharp edge of a boulder had cut into him as he fellâ€"and it was bleeding profusely. If he didn't shift back into human form soon he was going to bleed out. The only problem was that he seemed to unconscious. "Jet!" I took his head in my hands, but he didn't wake. "Jet!" I said again, more desperately, "Jet, please!" His eyelids fluttered. "Jet! You have to shift back. Please! You're hurt, you're bleeding. You need to shift." He stirred and a gasp of pain escaped from his body. I gently stroked the fur on top of his head. "Come on, Jet. Shift!" He grimaced, and I watched as he body returned to its normal form. I looked at the gash in his sideâ€"it was closed, scabbed overâ€"as if it were days, maybe even weeks old. I sighed with relief.

Another advantage to being a shapeshifterâ€"any wound you obtain while in your animal form will heal once you return to your human form. Well, depending on the size of the wound, it won't heal completely, but it will definitely stop bleeding and most likely scab over. Cole swears this even holds true for broken bonesâ€"claiming he broke his ankle as a tiger and when he shifted back it was only a

fractureâ€"but I don't buy it. Cole tends to over exaggerate things.

"You okay?" I asked cautiously as Jet opened his eyes. He closed his eyes again and let out a long breath. He slowly sat up, putting a hand to his forehead.

"I think so," he said, rubbing his head a bit.

"I'm so sorry," I said.

"What are you apologizing for?" he asked.

"I bit your ankle. I'm the reason you fell."

"You always do that. I'm the idiot who tripped over his own feet." He chuckled. I didn't say anything. Jet made to get up, groaning a little as the movement stretched his wound, but froze on his one knee.

"Jet?" I said. He didn't respond. "Jet? What's wrong?"

"Where are we, Mar?"

"We're in the woods." I said, confused.

"I know, but how deep? We're pretty far from any roads or hiking paths, right?" he asked, still not moving.

"Yeah. Why?" He held out his hand, pointing to the soil.

"Do you see that?"

"See what?" He pointed again and I leaned closer.

"Those," he whispered. He was pointing to footprintsâ€"footprints that came right out of the brook and disappeared at the edge of the hill I had just climbed downâ€"human footprints.

"Maybe someone got lost?" I said, but even as I said it I didn't believe it. He shook his head.

"No, we're too far out." He frowned, "They start at the stream, and just vanish over there are the foot of the hill. It doesn't make any sense. What would someone be doing out here?" I didn't know. It was certainly strange. My thoughts wandered back to the mermaid I had seen. Was it possible for her to travel from the ocean to this tiny brook and then get out and walk around? It sounded crazy. "Does your family ever go out this way?" Jet asked, looking up at me. I shook my head.

"No, they usually keep to the east." Jet frowned again and stared back at the footprints. I placed my hand on his shoulder. "Come on. We should head back. It's going to get dark soon." He nodded and let his body follow the pull of my hand. We shifted and ran back to my Jeepâ€"not racing this timeâ€"just running. When we reached the clearing where I had left my car we shifted back and got dressed. I was about to open my door when I thought I heard someone singing. I stoppedâ€"it sounded like it was coming from the beach. I glanced over at Jet and he gave me a puzzled look. There were no other cars

nearby. Quietly, we both made our way down the steps to the small beach again. There was a girl with long, honey-blond hair standing on the sand.

"Bella?" I said, incredulously. She jumped and turned "shocked to see both Jet and I standing on the isolated beach with her. "What are you doing here?" She smiled sheepishly.

"Oh, I just wanted to go for a swim." She smiled again, more confidently this time, as if she was trying to convince me.

"All the way out here? On a deserted beach?" Jet asked, suspiciously.

"Yeah, it's real quiet and peaceful, you know?" she said. I looked over to Jet. The way he was staring at me, I could tell exactly what he was thinking—"he thought it was Bella who made those footprints back in the canyon. But that wasn't possible. The canyon was at least five miles away—"she couldn't have gotten there and back before us. I shot him a look that told him "no way". Of course he ignored it.

"So, Bella, you like to hike?" he asked. She shook her head.

"Not really. I prefer the beach to the mountains."

"Then how'd you get here? We didn't notice another car." Jet asked, practically interrogating Bella. I stopped him, jumping in before Bella could even attempt to answer.

"What he means to say is that we noticed you don't have a car here, and we wanted to offer you a ride home." I spewed out.

"Yeah, sure. That'd be great. Thanks!" Bella said. I gestured for her to go up the half-hidden steps ahead of me. When Bella's back was to me, I turned and gave Jet an evil glare. He just stared right back at me. We both knew something was up with Bella, and Jet was determined to find out what.

## 10. Supernatural Secrets

The three of us were silent as we walked up to the car. Bella paused at the side of the Jeep—"waiting for Jet and I to catch up. I gave her a small smile as I passed her and walked around to the driver's side.

"Where are your shoes?" Bella asked Jet, covering her mouth a bit to keep from laughing. I was thankful she didn't inquire about his missing shirt too.

"Don't have any," Jet said as he climbed in the front seat and Bella hopped in the back. I widened my eyes at him in frustration. Didn't he know we were supposed to protect our secret no matter what? Not coming up with a probable explanation for why he didn't have any shoes with him definitely fell into the protecting part of the secret. Jet clearly didn't care though. He returned the look I gave him, adding an unfazed "what?"

I rolled my eyes. "He left them at home," I said, trying to save the

already horrible situation. Between Bella mysteriously showing up on the deserted beach and Jet's cryptic remarks towards her, I was surprised that they weren't shouting interrogations at each other.

"Oh. I prefer to be barefoot on the beach too," Bella said, smiling again. If she was suspicious of us, just as we were of her, she didn't show it. She was so bubbly—"it was impossible not to smile back at her"—well, it was impossible for me. Jet stared straight ahead, his eyes narrowed on a tree in front of the car. The tree could have burst into flames from the intensity of his glare.

I started the car. Turning it around, I travelled back down the dirt road I had driven over only a few hours ago. The sun was only just starting to set—"I could already tell that summer was coming"—the days were getting longer. Only a week ago I wouldn't have been able to stay out as long as Jet and I did today without it getting dark. We were very quiet as I drove. I wanted to say something—"start a conversation with Bella, but I couldn't think of anything to ask her other than "Can you turn yourself into another form?" I knew Jet certainly wasn't going to start talking. He just sat next to me—"still shooting lasers through the windshield.

Thankfully, Bella spoke up. "So, how long have you lived here, Marina?" she asked, leaning forward and gripping the back of the seat to better hear my answer.

"My whole life," I said.

"That's really cool," she said, "You probably don't think so, but I kind of wish I had that. Moving around so much is hard. And it gets tiring." I nodded as if I understood.

"Yeah, it must be difficult to have to constantly start over," I said. I wondered if Bella moving a lot wasn't because of her father's work. What if it had nothing to do with his job and everything to do with some secret she was harboring? I thought about it for a moment. If my family was outed as shapeshifters would we pack up and disappear to another state or country? Yes. I knew the answer immediately. My father would have us gone that night. Nothing mattered more than our safety and the protection of our family secret. If the same held true for Bella then she had spilled her secret an awful lot. That was if she was even keeping a secret.

"So, I guess I'll have to get you show me around. Living here your whole life, you must know all the good restaurants and hang out spots," Bella smiled at me. I nodded, smiling back. "What about you John? How long have you lived here?" she asked.

"Since seventh grade," was all he said.

"Where did you live before this?"

"Colorado."

"So, you must prefer the mountains to the beach," Bella said, bringing up our conversation from the beach—"which was probably the worst thing she could have done.

"Definitely," Jet said. Then, trying to sound innocent, but it

sounded more sickly sweet, he asked, "Why do you like the beach better? Does it have something to do with the water?" I watched her reaction in my rearview mirror. I thought I caught a hint of fear in her eyes but it quickly disappeared. I didn't jump to her rescue this time—actually wanting to hear how Bella would answer Jet's questions.

She shrugged. Trying to seem like the questions didn't bother her? "I guess I just really like the ocean," she said. Jet gave me significant look. "It's so pretty, you know? It calms me." I gave him a look back. Jet didn't say another word until after I had dropped Bella off at her house.

"She's hiding something," he said as soon as we pulled away from the waterfront cottage, "And don't try to defend her, I know you suspect something too."

"Fine," I said, "Yes, I think she's keeping a secret, but it could be anything."

"Like being able to transform into water?"

"Transform into water?" I asked skeptically, "'You're crazy. Did you ever think that maybe she's afraid of water? That that's her secret?'"

"She didn't sound afraid of it just now. It almost sounded like she was in love with it." He paused, thinking for a moment. "No," he said frowning, "it's something bigger than fear." I didn't want to admit it, but I agreed with Jet. Whatever Bella was hiding, it was important. Half of me wished she was a shapeshifter too, while the other half was trying to convince myself that Bella's secret had nothing to do with my own. I found my thoughts drifting to the mermaid I had seen. She was proof that shapeshifters weren't the only supernatural beings in the world. If shapeshifters and mermaids existed, what others were out there? Witches? Fairies? Vampires? I shuddered at the thought of the last one. Was it possible that Bella was one of those, or even something else?

Neither Jet nor Bella were anywhere to be found when I got to school the next morning. It was odd—not seeing Jet standing at the edge of the parking lot waiting for me. We had a deal—one would drive to school, in the morning, while the other would get to run. That way, at the end of the day, there would be a car for the two of us to drive home in. It was easier to travel as a wolf in the early morning than in the afternoon when there were a lot more people up and on the road. We usually switched on and off for who would have to drive, but I've been driving for the past month. Every morning I would find Jet leaning against the same tree with his arms crossed over his chest in his typical shorts and t-shirt. But, today the tree was bare. I went inside to see if I could find Bella, but she too was M.I.A.—which wasn't so surprising since I didn't actually know where her locker or her first class were.

So instead I got my things and went to sit with Tommy and Grace before the first bell rang. Tommy asked me where Jet was and I told him I didn't know. He seemed just as surprised that I didn't know where Jet was as I was that Jet hadn't been waiting for me. The three of us talked about the new movie that was coming out this weekend—nothing that exciting. I began thinking about the little

information I had discovered about mermaids the night before. My search hadn't turned up anything interesting. The hits were mostly for movies and T.V. shows involving mermaids—a lot about The Little Mermaid. I had to scroll through five pages worth before I found anything that even remotely suggested mermaids existed—and after exploring the information a bit I decided that the site was questionable.

Ten minutes later I headed off to my Journalism class, where we talked about the importance of a good headline. I was a bit distracted though. Jet's disappearance bothered me more than it should have. Where was he? Was he even in school? Jet never got sick though—well, at least not since he moved here. And he wouldn't ditch, not unless something extremely important came up—like someone died. Oh God. What if someone did die? What if he died? No, no. I shook my head. That was ridiculous. I was sure Jet hadn't died overnight. I pulled my phone out of my bag, and, hiding it under the top of my desk, I texted Jet—asking him where he was and if he was okay—just in case.

Jet still hadn't texted me back by the time I got to American History two hours later and, inside, I was an emotional wreck. I kept telling myself that I was overreacting—that Jet was fine—but every time I got close to believing that was true my brain came up with some other crazy scenario that would have resulted in Jet's absence. I had already been through him sleeping late, a relative getting sick, a relative dying, him choking on his breakfast, him being seen while shifting, him being hit by a car, him being shot by hunters—the last two probably being the worst but they were all pretty bad.

When Bella slid into the seat next to me again, I smiled at her—pretending I wasn't still freaking out inside. Today she wore teal shorts and a short sleeved light pink shirt. Remembering the coral shorts she wore yesterday, I wondered if she had a thing for bright colored pants.

Thinking I'd solve at least one of my problems from the morning, I leaned closer to Bella and said, "Hey, I looked for you this morning, but then I realized I didn't know where your locker was." I chuckled a bit at my own stupidity to empathize the absurdness of the situation. She laughed a bit too, and again I wondered what big secret she was harboring. Maybe Jet and I were just being paranoid—maybe whatever secret she had wasn't that big a deal.

"Oh, it's just down by the library," Bella told me.

"Oh okay," I said, "I'll have to look for you there tomorrow then." She nodded and smiled. I was about to turn to face the front of the room when Bella spoke again.

"Yeah, I saw Jet down there this morning." Relief washed over me like a rolling ocean wave, but then confusion hit me like a crashing one.

"Jet?" I asked, "Where?"

"In the library," she said as if that was the obvious answer. I frowned—Jet never went to the library. He always insisted that there wasn't anything in the books there that couldn't already be

found online.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure," Bella said eyeing me suspiciously, "we sat together and talked a bit before class. He said he was there doing some research for some stupid algebra essay he had to write."

"Algebra essay?" I asked, raising my eyebrows.

"Yeah, weird right? Who assigns essays for a math class?" She rolled her eyes and faced forward again. I huffed to show my agreement, and turned back to my own desk. I didn't tell Bella that there was no algebra essay. I should knowâ€"Jet and I are in the same algebra class. But then why did he tell Bella that was why he was in the library? What was he really doing there? And whatever it was, why was it so important that he couldn't wait for me outside or even bother to tell me where he was?

I dipped my hand inside my jeans pocket and pulled out my cell phone againâ€"still no texts. What was Jet up to?

## 11. Raindrops and Crushes

It started raining just before history ended. I guess we'll have to try to find table inside today, I thought. The light rain turned into a full-out downpour within the next minute. Yup, definitely staying inside for lunch. When class was over Bella and I collected our things and walked out together.

And who just so happened to be standing outside the door, casually leaning against the wall, waiting for us? Jet. My jaw tightened. He could wait outside our class but he couldn't bother to tell me he wouldn't be meeting me in the morning?

"Hey," he said, smiling a little wider than normal.

"Hey," Bella responded. I didn't say anything, but Jet didn't seem to notice. I stared at him curiously. That's when I realized itâ€"he wasn't smiling at us, he was smiling at Bella. I could have been invisible for all her knew.

Woah. Did Jet like Bella? It didn't make any sense. Just yesterday he was ready to lock her in a room with a hungry lion to figure out what she was hiding, and today he had a crush on her?

I didn't realize I had been clenching my fists until the muscles in my hands started to cramp. I quickly relaxed them. Why did the idea that Jet might like Bella make me want to bash their heads into the tiled wall next to us?

The three of us walked to the cafeteria togetherâ€"Jet making small talk with Bella. I could have jumped in the conversation but I didn't. When we entered the cafeteria I noticed that Annie and Grace had already snagged a table close to the door. Jet, Bella, and I put our stuff down at the table and went to buy food.

I grabbed the last slice of plain pizza and an apple from the bin off

to the side as Bella made herself a salad. She picked up a packet of salad dressing and a bag of chips out of the bin next to the fruit.

Coming up to me she asked, "Where are the drinks again?" I silently pointed to the large cooler next to Jet who took a basket of chicken fingers off the shelf. I watched as Bella walked over but struggled to balance everything in her hands and slide the door to the cooler open.

"Here, let me get that," the words out of Jet's mouth rang crystal clear across the room, despite the voluminous noise. He opened the cooler and pulled out a juice for Bella.

He was just being friendly. She obviously couldn't carry everything, so he was helping her out. That was all—"anyone would have done the same thing.

But then I saw Jet take Bella's plate of salad out of her hands too, so that the only things she held were the bag of chips and the packet of salad dressing. He smiled at her and I felt my whole body tense.

I looked away from them and down at the food in my hands. I groaned internally when I realized that I had inadvertently used my apple as a stress ball and it was now covered in bruises. As Jet and Bella got in line to pay for their food, I went back to get a new apple.

By the time I had gotten a new apple and paid for my lunch, Jet and Bella were already seated at the table with Annie and Grace. I stopped in my tracks when I saw where Jet was sitting—"in between Annie and Bella. I was tempted to walk up behind him and smash my pizza on top of his head.

But I couldn't do that. I had no reason to do that—"not really. Jet and I were friends—"that was it. Sure, we spent a lot of time together, but we weren't together together. Jet could like whoever he wanted and he could try to be with whoever he wanted, even if that person was Bella. It would be wrong of me to stand in his way.

I sat down next to Grace, across from Jet. Annie and Grace's confused looks alternating between Jet and I did not go unnoticed—"well, at least they didn't go unnoticed by me—"Jet seemed too consumed with what Bella was doing to pay any attention to the rest of us at the table.

While Jet and Bella talked amongst themselves, I turned to Annie and Grace, intent on ignoring Jet for the rest of the lunch period.

"Where are Tommy and Connor?" I asked them, inquiring about our other two tablemates.

"I'm not sure," Annie said.

"They had gym together last period," Grace said, "and I heard the classes went and got caught in the storm at the end of the period. They probably still have their heads under the hand dryers in the bathroom." The three of us laughed. Bella looked up from her conversation with Jet but didn't say anything.

It wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. My conversations with Annie and Grace not only distracted me from Jet's involvement with Bella, but also gave me a chance to have a bit of girl talk—something I quickly realized I had been lacking by spending all my time with Jet.

About half way through the period, Connor and Tommy showed up. None of us were exactly surprised to see that the two of them were still dripping wet.

"What happened to you guys?" Jet asked.

"There's a carnival outside and we volunteered to be the ones in the dunk tank," Tommy said. Everyone laughed at his attempt at a joke.

"The stupid gym teachers made us go outside for gym," Connor explained, "We tried to tell them that it looked like it was going to rain, but they didn't listen." He gestured to his soaking wet body, "So, we got wet."

"Really wet," Tommy emphasized.

It was then that I noticed Bella leaning into Jet, away from Tommy and Connor, as if he could protect her from the wet boys. The anger I felt before returned and I had to make sure I didn't have anything in my hands this time.

Tommy walked around to the other side of Connor and carefully sat down next to Bella—making sure he didn't get her, or anyone else, wet. When a small puddle formed on the table under his arm and began to creep its way towards Bella, Tommy quickly snatched a napkin and soaked up the water to stop it from getting any closer to Bella's arm. I narrowed my eyes at Tommy—"did he know something the rest of us didn't?

Connor, on the other hand, clearly didn't care if he got any of us wet. And as if to prove my point, he shook his head as he sat down—his matted hair turning with his head—flinging drops of water on everyone at the table.

Bella was up and out of her seat before anyone could even yell at Connor for getting them wet. Without saying a word, she dashed out of the cafeteria. Jet and I both jumped out of seats at the same time. Together we raced out of the cafeteria after Bella. After running through the open doorway, I spotted her dip into the girl's bathroom at the end of the hall.

Jet followed me to the door to the bathroom. He shot me an expectant look before I silently opened the door and slipped inside. I probably should have called to Bella—announcing my presence—but something stopped me. I peeked my head around the corner to where the sinks and stalls were.

I did not expect to see what I did.

Had I not already seen it while I was swimming yesterday, I would have thought my eyes were deceiving me. But I knew they weren't. Lying on the tile floor in front of me was the mermaid I had seen at

my favorite spot. Her tail was a shimmery orange color and her hair was the same color as the mermaid I had seen yesterday—the same color as Bella's hair. Bella was the mermaid.

Bella was a mermaid. Jet had been right. Not only was Bella hiding a secret, but she was hiding a huge secret. I smiled when I realized that I had been right too. Bella's secret was something supernatural. She may not be a shapeshifter but she wasn't completely human either.

I heard Bella groan—waking me from my thoughts—and she moved to turn over. I wasn't sure why, but I quickly hid myself behind the wall by the door again. When I got the chance I silently slipped out of the bathroom again—slowly closing the door behind me. I turned and found myself inches away from Jet's face.

"Well?" he asked, "What's going on?"

I hesitated. Should I tell Jet what I saw? He would definitely believe me about the mermaid if I did. "Nothing."

"Nothing?" Jet raised his eyebrows at me—questioning my answer.

"I couldn't see her," I told him, "she was in one of the stalls."

"Is she okay?"

"From what I could tell," I seethed. Why did he care about her so much? I walked away, back towards the cafeteria, leaving my anger with him.

I had made my decision. I wasn't going to tell Jet about Bella. Being a mermaid was Bella's secret to tell. Just as I knew I wouldn't want Jet to tell someone my secret, it wouldn't be right of me to tell Jet Bella's. I only hoped that, in time, Bella would trust me enough to tell me herself.

## 12. Promise

When the last bell of the day rang I was still thinking about Bella—and Jet, but mostly Bella. Everything fit together so perfectly. I didn't know how I hadn't seen it before. Bella's fearful looks at water, the way she disappeared when that beaker of water spilled on her, finding her alone of the deserted beach, the way she described her love for the ocean—everything pointed to the fact that she was the mermaid I had seen in the water.

I went to my locker and grabbed everything I would need to do my homework for that night. As I walked to my Jeep I thought about what I had considered yesterday. Just because Bella was the mermaid I saw didn't mean that it still wasn't possible that there were other supernatural creatures out there. I wasn't exactly a fan of the idea that there might be vampires out there, but I was all for fairies and witches—well, as long as they were good.

When I reached my car, I unlocked it and hopped in the driver's seat. I wasn't giving Jet a ride back to my house after the way he had treated me today—he could find his own ride, or wait until everyone

left, shift, and run home.

I pulled out of the parking space and out onto the road. In my head, Bella being a mermaid opened a whole new realm of possibilities. There could also be people with extraordinary abilities like telekinesis or even flight. So many things from my old children's fantasy books suddenly had the possibility of being real—"fairies, witches, ghosts, werewolves, sirens"—the list went on and on.

Perhaps Bella was a siren too. Some of the information on mermaids I had read last night hinted that mermaids and sirens were actually the same creatures.

Laying my arm on the side of the car door, I sighed—"there was no way I was going to find out if Bella was a siren unless I asked her myself, and, by doing that, I would be revealing to her that I know she is a mermaid.

Twice after seeing her in the bathroom I found myself wanting to talk to her about what it was like to be a mermaid. Once when she returned to the lunch table, claiming water had splashed in her eye causing it to sting, and a second time when Jet left the lab table during Chem to get us safety goggles. But both times I remembered my promise—"I would not tell Bella I knew she was a mermaid until she decided to tell me.

My promise was a lot harder to keep than I thought it would be. I thought that if Bella told me her secret then I would be able to tell her mine, and we would then become closer friends, just as Jet and I had. And, after talking with Annie and Grace during lunch, I realized that I really wanted a girl friend to share everything with.

Not only that, but I realized if both Bella and I knew each other's secrets then I would be able to swim in my dolphin form more often. I could follow my dad's rule, that I needed to take someone with me whenever I shifted, would be followed because Bella and I could go swimming together. I yearned for the chance to swim whenever I wanted, without having to sneak around.

I let out a sigh as I turned the steering wheel to the left. I knew, no matter how much I wanted to, that I couldn't tell her.

It had been hardest during Chem class. I found myself trying to protect Bella—"attempting to keep any water we had to handle away from her. I ended up designating a lot of jobs to Jet, afraid of letting Peter handle something and spill it again, just as he had done the day before. The whole period I spent worrying something would spill on Bella, or she would figure out what I was doing. Keeping her from getting wet, while also not letting on that I knew her secret was much more difficult than the lab we were supposed to conduct.

I wondered how she did it—"how she kept from getting wet all the time. The more I thought about it, the more I realized how many times you could come in contact with water throughout the day. There were the obvious ones, like the rain, washing your hands, and the water fountain, but then there were the ones I didn't even recognize as water, like condensation on a cold bottle or sweat—"ew, I really hoped sweat wasn't something that could make Bella turn. Even if it

did, it seemed like the whole world was against herâ€"it was a miracle that no one else had discovered her secret yet.

Or had they? I thought back to lunch where Tommy had been extra careful around Bella. He'd made sure he didn't get her wet at all, even wiping up the insignificant puddle of water that his sleeve had made on the table. Did he know that Bella was a mermaid? If he did, I wondered how he had found out. And did Bella know he knew? By the way she acted around him my guess was no. So did that mean Tommy was in the same position I was in? Even if he was there was no way I could find out unless I asked him, and if I did that then I would be revealing Bella's secret. There was still a possibility that Tommy didn't know about Bella. Either way, I made a mental note to keep a close eye on Tommy over the next couple days.

I pressed down on the accelerator more, speeding up a bit. As usual, I was the only one on this particular road. It was like no one knew it even existed, not even the cops.

Against my will, my thoughts wandered to Jet. The only time he talked to me today had been outside the girl's bathroom, and it had been to ask how Bella was. He spent the rest of the day talking to Bella and completely ignoring me.

As hard as it was, I had to admit that Jet was falling for Bella. If I was a good friend I would have been happy that Jet had finally found someoneâ€"I would have been ecstatic that that someone was also my friend. But realizing that Jet liked Bella as more than a friend made me realize something about myselfâ€"

I liked Jet as more than a friend.

My hostility from earlier was gone, only to be replaced by despair. I wanted Jet to be happy, but I wanted him to be happy with me, and I couldn't seem to understand why that wouldn't work.

In the end, I resolved to at least try to be supportive of Jet and Bella. I didn't want to lose my friends just because they might want to become a couple.

I reached down to check my phone. Maybe Jet had texted me, remembering our afternoon hike. But there were no new messages. I put my phone back down and looked up at the road again.

Before I could even think my foot slammed on the breakâ€"pressing it down as far as it would go. The tires screeched, filling my ears with the cringing sound. My hands gripped the steering wheel like I was jumping off a boat and it was my only life preserver.

I tried to push down on the break further but it was already down all the way. My eyes widened as I realized the break wasn't going to be enough. I forced the joints in my arms to unlock and turned the wheel to the right, narrowly avoiding the person standing in the middle of the road.

At first, the car simply swerved, but then it didn't stop swerving. I lost count of how many times the car spun. I caught sight of the trees close to the roadâ€"they were getting closerâ€"I was going to crash.

I squeezed my eyes shut, bracing myself for the impact. I was going to die.

It didn't come. When I opened my eyes, I saw that my Jeep had stopped about a foot away from the nearest tree. I breathed a sigh of relief and relaxed my grip on the steering wheel. I was alive.

The person in the road.

I quickly unbuckled my seatbelt gently pressing my fingers against my left shoulder, there would be a large bruise there later and jumped out of the car. I rushed over to the person who was still standing in the middle of the road. It was a woman, but her eyes weren't wide nor was she shaking like I expected her to be. In fact, she didn't look scared at all, only confused.

"Oh my God!" I choked out, "Are you okay?"

She glanced up at me but then looked back down, frowning slightly.  
"Yes."

"What were you doing in the middle of the road?"

She turned her head, taking in her surroundings as if she was just discovering she was standing on the asphalt. "I don't know."

"You don't know?" I repeated. Now I was the one confused. "Well, what are you doing out here? Do you need a ride?" We were in the middle of nowhere there was nothing but road and trees for at least a couple miles.

She looked up at me and I automatically took a step back. Her eyes were a dark brown but there was a foggy substance the lingering over her pupil and iris it almost looked like she had milk in her eyes.

This time, when she spoke her voice was monotone but much more confident. "No, I'm waiting for someone. Thank you for your concern, but you can leave now."

"Umm, okay." I didn't argue with the woman she was freaking me out. I walked back over to my Jeep and got in. I restarted the car and carefully pulled it out of the grass and back onto the road. When I looked in my rearview mirror the woman was still standing in the middle of the road, watching me.

### 13. The Best Fight

I had goose-bumps on my arms and legs the rest of the way home. I couldn't help but glance in my rearview mirror every five seconds to make sure the woman wasn't still there. She seriously creeped me out, not to mention she was the reason I had to run my car off the road.

The way she had watched me drive away, it was almost as if she had wanted to attack me. And yet, when I first got out of the car to see if she was okay she seemed so confused. She acted like she didn't know where she was or even how she got there. Then the next minute she was demanding that I leave and looking at me like she wanted to

kill me.

I shivered, remembering the hazy look of the woman's eyes. Something was definitely wrong with her, but I had no idea what.

I pulled up my driveway and, grabbing my backpack off the passenger seat, got out of the car. I walked around back, wondering who was home. Skye was probably home. Even though I drove home and she had to take the bus she usually beat me since the middle school got out five minutes before the high school. I thought about asking her to go for a runâ€"well, a flight, in her case. We hadn't gone out together in a long time.

I wasn't sure if either of my parents would be here but I knew Cole wouldn't be home. He had lacrosse practice after school today.

The one person I did not expect to find sitting on my back porchâ€"smiling at me like everything was completely normal and he hadn't just ignored me or blown me off all dayâ€"was Jet. All the anger I promised I would leave behind me came flooding back into my veins like a tsunami.

"Hey, Mar!" he said brightly.

Hey Mar? That was all he had to say? I didn't respond. I walked right up the steps, pretending he wasn't thereâ€"pretending my stomach wasn't doing flip-flops and my hands weren't itching to hit someoneâ€"that someone being Jet.

"So, you ready to go for a run?" I stole a glance at him. His black hair was a bit tousled and there was a genuine smile on his face. I bit my lipâ€"why did he have to look so hot? He was only wearing a pair of khaki cargo shortsâ€|again. I found myself staring at his chest and absâ€|again. The fact that his half-naked body was so distracting annoyed meâ€"I was supposed to be mad at him.

"God, Jet. Can't you put a shirt on for once in your life?" I didn't know why I said itâ€"it wasn't like I was bothered by a shirtless Jetâ€"but it didn't matter. My anger was flowing out of me like a can a soda that was shaken before opened, and I let it.

He frowned at me. "Is there something wrong?"

"Oh, no. Why would anything be wrong?" I said, sarcasm dripping from my lips as I spoke, "Unless of course you count how you don't show up in the parking lot this morning, you don't answer any of my texts, you completely ignore me at lunch, and I practically get in a car accident on my way home because some idiot thinks it's fun to stand in the middle of the road. Oh yeah, everything is perfectly fine." I turned my back to him, crossing my arms over my chest.

He rushed up to me then, nothing but concern in his eyes. "You were in a car accident?" Placing his hands around my arms, he turned me towards him and asked, "Are you hurt?"

I looked away from him. "No, I'm okay," I muttered. I pulled myself out of his grasp. I took a deep breath to calm myself. With my back to him again, I said, "What I really would like to know is what is up with you and Bella."

I could hear him frown even though I couldn't see his face. "Me and Bella?"

I whirled back around. "Don't play dumb," I said, "You know what I'm talking about. You followed her around like a lost puppy all day."

"I'm just trying to get closer to her, Mar."

"Yeah. That much I could see," I snapped, my anger still controlling me.

He wrinkled his eyebrows, giving me a funny look. Then something that looked like understanding lit up in his eyes. "Do you think I like her?"

Again, I looked away, but the hostility in my voice was still there when I spoke. "I couldn't hold it back. "I know you like her."

He laughed straight out laughed at me. Some of my anger faded. I looked back up at him. What was so funny?

"I'm trying to get close to her so maybe she'll tell me what her secret is." He pressing his lips together as if afraid that if he opened them he would burst out laughing again.

Ever since I had discovered Bella's secret I had practically forgotten Jet's determination to figure out what it was too. I raised my eyebrows. "That's what this is about?"

"Of course." He let go and laughed again. He took a step towards me, shaking his head. "God, Marina, you really are blind aren't you?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He closed the distance between us so that his face was only a couple inches away from mine. I could feel his hot breath against my lips. I let my arms fall back down to my side.

His voice was soft when he finally spoke, "How could you possibly think I like Bella when it's so obvious I'm already in love with you?"

I held my breath as my heart swelled. I didn't look away from him this time.

He reached his hand up and gently placed it against the side of my face, his fingers entwining themselves in my dark hair. He came so close that our noses touched. I closed my eyes.

The next thing I felt was a light brush of skin across my lips. He gently pressed his lips to mine. He kissed me slowly—a bit hesitant—but then I kissed him back.

It was soft and sweet—slightly romantic even. It made my head spin and lost all sense of location. I felt like we were anywhere and everywhere at the same time, but, wherever we definitely were no longer on my back porch.

He leaned back a bit, our lips breaking apart. Taking a small breath I followed his movement and our lips met again.

I reached my one hand up between us and wrapped it around the back of his neck while I rested the other against his firm chest. He moved the hand that was against my cheek so that it was completely tangled in my hair and he slipped his other hand around my hip to the small of my back, pulling me closerâ€"our bodies pressing together, fitting perfectly.

Our second kiss was more intense, more passionate, more fervent, moreâ€|everything. Our lips moved over each other's, opening and closingâ€"exploring. The fire between us only increased my desire. I wanted him, all of himâ€"I kissed him deeper. I ran my hand down his torso, exploring the contours of his muscles. His hand that was against my back innocently slipped under the hem of my shirt, caressing the smooth, bare skin of my back.

We kissed another couple minutes before we broke apart, both breathing heavily. He pressed his forehead to mine and I opened my eyes. I stared into his green eyes, noticing the golden-brown specs in them for the first timeâ€"I felt like I was gazing out onto a meadow hidden in the woods.

Cupping my hands around the back of his neck, I said, "Well, that was the best fight I've ever had."

He smiled and started to laugh. He wrapped his arms around me and hugged me close to him. Resting my head against his warm skin, I breathed in his scentâ€"the familiar smell of the forest and of furâ€"and smiled.

#### 14. Possessed

That day Jet and I didn't go for a run, or hike, or whatever you want to call it, for the first time in months. Honestly, we spent most of the afternoon making out.

I'm not ashamed of it. I don't regret it. Although, I probably would have done both those things had someone caught us. But, thankfully no one didâ€"well, they didn't catch us because we heard them come home and had sense enough to break apart before they saw us.

I was afraid that Jet wouldn't be as welcome in my home as he was now if my parents knew how we spent the afternoon. I still wanted him to be able come over anytime, like he owned the place. I didn't want things to change.

Change? Why was I thinking about how things might change? Jet and I aren't officially together or anythingâ€"all we did was kissâ€|a lotâ€|and it was amazing.

When my mom stuck her head out the back door to check on us, Jet and I were sitting on the step, still awfully close to each other.

"You staying for dinner, John?" she asked, not noticing how we were closer than normal.

"I'd love to," Jet replied.

I smiled. "Honestly, Mom," I said, "why do you even bother asking?"

She smiled back at usâ€"still not noticing our unusual proximity. Shaking her head she said, "I don't know." She went back inside then, leaving us alone once more.

Jet leaned in for another kiss, but I held a finger to his lips. My eyes darted to the open screen doorâ€"checking to see if anyone would see us, but there was no one inside in direct line of view. I planted another kiss on him before resting my head against his shoulder. I debated whether or not that would look suspicious if anyone looked outside. I was sure I had done that before, so I would be okay to do it again, right? I didn't think I was ready for anyone to know that Jet and I were more than friends.

Jet and I sat like that, with my head on his shoulder, staring out at the tree line that surrounded my backyard until my mom called us in for dinner. We stood and Jet gave my hand a quick squeeze before letting go and walking inside. We went through the kitchen to the dining room and took our usual seats beside each other at the table. Everything was normalâ€"perfectly normal, and I wanted it to stay that way.

My mom placed a bowl of salad and six plates of spaghetti on the table. Taking her seat at one end the table, "So, kids, how was your day?"

Jet and I looked at each other. If I told her the truth it would have gone something like this: well, Jet ignored me all day to find out what secret Bella is hiding, only I was the one who discovered that secret. And get this? Bella is a mermaid! Crazy, right? Anyway, I was mad at Jet for giving me the cold shoulder so when he came over we fought, but then he told me he loved me so we spent the rest of the afternoon making out.

Yeah, I definitely couldn't tell her the truth. So, instead I just smiled and said, "Good."

But of course she wasn't going to leave it at that. "Anything exciting happen in school?"

Yeah, I found out my new friend is a mermaid. "Nope."

"Nothing?" my mom asked, clearly skeptical.

Under the table, Jet reached his hand over to my lap and took mine in his. He gave my hand a gentle squeeze.

I smiled, which ended up being the wrong thing to do since my mom took the smile as something did happen in school.

"Marina?"

"Hmm?" She was looking at me expectantly, "Oh, umm I got an A on my algebra test." I lied.

"Oh, great job, sweetie," satisfied she moved on to my brother, "and

how was your day Cole?"

Great, now I was going to have to actually get an A on my next algebra test.

Jet squeezed my hand again and I smiled. This time nobody noticed. I ran my thumb over Jet's fingers. Having his hand in mine felt really nice, not to mention natural. Again, I started to wonder if we would actually become a couple, if Jet wanted to become one. He was certainly acting like he did. What were their friends going to think? I wondered if they saw it coming. Earlier, Jet made it seem like everyone but me knew he was in love with me, was that true? If so, why hadn't anyone told me sooner?

"Aren't you hungry, Marina?" my dad asked me.

I snapped my head back up to the scene at the table in front of me. Everyone's plate of spaghetti, including Jet's, was at least halfway gone.

"Oh, uh, yeah," I muttered, quickly untwining my fingers from Jet's and picking up my fork. I shoved a loaded forkful of pasta and sauce into my mouth. Thankfully, my family turned their attention away from me and I attempted to chew the chipmunk-cheek inducing amount of spaghetti in my mouth.

Having finished interrogating all the kids, my mom asked my dad, "So, how was work today?"

"Good, until about five o'clock," he said. My dad works as a police officer in the area.

"What happened at five?"

"There was a horrible accident over on Evergreen Street," he said. My ears perked up at the mention of Evergreen—"that was the road I had almost hit the woman on. "A woman was killed."

"What?" I blurted out. For once, the happenings of my dad's workday had my full attention. "How?"

"The truck driver says the woman walked right out in front of him. He barely had time to step on the break before she was hit."

"That's awful," Skye said, frowning and looking down at her plate.

"What did she look like?" I asked. Was it possible that this was the same woman I had almost run over?

"She had brown hair," my dad started. Okay, no reason to panic—"lots of people have brown hair. "She seemed like the ordinary Jane Doe, except that the driver of the truck kept raving about her eyes."

"What about her eyes?"

"I didn't see anything strange but he claimed her eyes looked like she was possessed or something." My dad shook his head, "The man was probably still in shock from the accident."

"Possessed how?" I asked.

My dad frowned, "He said something about her eyes having this milky white film over them, but I didn't see anything."

I could feel the blood draining from my face. The truck driver wasn't seeing things out of shock because I had seen the same exact thing. It was definitely the same woman.

"May I be excused?" I asked quietly.

Both my parents gave me a concerned look but nodded.

I stood up from the table, pushed my chair in, and left the room. I could hear Jet following behind me as I walked through the kitchen and out the back door. I didn't stop until I reached the tree line at the edge of the backyard.

"Marina?" Jet asked hesitantly as he approached, "Are you okay?"

I looked down. I spoke softly as if afraid the trees were listening in on what I was about to say, "The woman who was killed, she was the same woman I almost hit earlier."

"You don't know that."

"Yes I do. The truck driver didn't imagine anything because I saw the haze in the woman's eyes too."

Jet didn't say anything.

"It could have been me. I might have been the one to kill her." I wrapped my arms around myself.

"But it wasn't," he pulled me against him, "Sometimes people lose hope in life and think that there's something better waiting for them."

I frowned. "She wasn't trying to commit suicide Jet."

"Maybe or maybe not. We'll never really know."

I stepped out of his arms. "No. The woman I met didn't want to die. At first she was really confused, like she had no idea how she got out there. And then the next it was like someone flipped a switch and she was all confident andâ€|creepy." I thought for a minute about how the truck driver described the woman. "Like she was possessed."

Jet took my hand. "Marina, I think you're in shock."

I pulled away from him. "I'm not in shock, Jet. Something's going on. Someone, or something is controlling people, and however they're doing it, they're using this ability to kill people." I looked up at his faceâ€"he probably thought I was crazy. He looked like he was about to argue with me, but I was surprised when he opened his mouth.

"I believe you," he said. "But what are we going to do?"

"I don't know," I said and looked out into the trees again, "I don't know."

## 15. Official

At school the next morning, Jet met me in the parking lot like normal. A million questions were going through my head as I took one step after another, closing the space between us. What was he going to do? Would he act like nothing's changed? Or would he take my hand? Maybe he would hug me? What if he didn't do anything? What if he just said "hi"? Would I be okay with that? Did I want to keep our relationship a secret from everyone or did I want it to be out in the open?

I hadn't forgotten about the woman who was possessed and then killed, but after spending over an hour coming up with possibilities, Jet and I were still at a loss as to what, or who, could do such a thing, let alone how to stop it or them. So, for now, my brain was focusing on the matter at handâ€"which just so happened to involve Jetâ€"aka my new boyfriendâ€|I think.

I was only a couple steps away from him now. Should I be the one to make the first move? I groaned internally. Why did relationships have to be so complicated? I was in one for less than a day and things were already confusing. My mind and heart were racing against each other as I made my final approach towards him.

"Hi," I saidâ€"my soft voice reflecting the nerves inside of me. Since when did I get nervous around Jet?

He took a step closer to me. I stared up into his green eyes, marveling at the simplicity of his gorgeous features, and swallowed the lump in my throat. Oh right, I thought, since these enormous feelings I have for him emerged and we became more than friends. I wondered if those feelings had really been there all along.

I felt my stomach do a back flip as he placed a hand on the small of my back. A second later, he pulled me against him, taking me by surprise. Our faces were less than two inches apart.

And then he kissed me, just as he had done in my backyard yesterday, and, for all I knew we could have been in my backyard. I lost track of all the other people who were in the parking lot with us, and I lost track of how many minutes there were until the warning bell rang. All of my senses were focused in on one thingâ€"Jet. The way his palm pressed against my back, the taste of his lips as they moved over mine, the sound his fingers made as they rubbed over my ear, the strong woodsy smell emanating from his green t-shirtâ€"all things I took in, and loved, as he kissed me.

When he pulled away I was smiling from ear to ear.

"Good morning," he whispered, smiling back at me. He took my hand in his and gave me a light tug in the direction of the building. I turned to walk with him.

That was when I froze. Everyone in the parking lot was staring at us. Someone whistled. Some kid from our gym class said "Damn." A bunch of girls' faces looked like they wanted to slap me. But it was Grace who

caught my attention.

She was smiling at us. "It's about time," she said audibly.

I kept smiling all the way into school.

By the time I walked through the door (which Jet had chivalrously held open for me), our topic of conversation had returned to the great mystery that was Bella's secretâ€"which wasn't actually a mystery to me anymoreâ€"but Jet didn't have to know that.

"I think we need to come up with a better way of finding out what she is hiding." He said, frowning slightly, his eyebrows furrowing.

I didn't say anything, I didn't even nodâ€"afraid Jet would realize I was being less than truthful with him.

"What do you think, Mar?" He studied me quizzically.

"Umm, yeah," I said, avoiding his eyes, knowing they would be the ones to give me away. He didn't say anything for a minute, but I knew he was watching me.

"Marina," he said slowly, "do you already know what Bella's secret is?"

"What?" I said, feigning ignorance, "Of course not."

"You're lying," he pointed out, "And you were lying yesterday after you followed Bella into the bathroom. You know I can always tell."

Damn, I thought I had fooled him then. Again, I didn't say anything.

"You're not going to tell me what it is, are you?"

I sighed. "It's not right, Jet," I said, "Bella's secret isn't mine to tell. Just as I can't tell her you turn into a great black wolf, I can't tell you what she's hiding." I thought my argument made perfect sense but I was still afraid he wouldn't share my opinion. Thankfully, I had nothing to worry about.

"I understand," he said solemnly, "I wouldn't want you to tell someone my secret. Does Bella know you know?"

"No," I said, shaking my head.

"Well, don't think you knowing will stop me from trying to find out myself."

"I was afraid you'd say that." I chuckled a bit and he smiled at me.

Since we didn't have any classes together in the morning, Jet and I split ways at my locker. He gave me another quick kiss on my forehead before disappearing up the staircase to the second floor. I grabbed my books for the morning and went to see if Bella was by the library.

If I wanted to be a good friend to Bella I needed to make sure Jet didn't figure out her secret, but if I wanted to be a good girlfriend to Jet I needed to tell him that Bella was a mermaid. With both options I knew I would feel like I was betraying someone's trust, whether they knew it or not. No matter how I felt about either one of them, I decided it was probably best for me to simply stay clear of the situationâ€"if that was even possible.

I found Bella pulling books out of her locker and shoving them in her bag. "Hey," I said, walking up to her.

She looked up at me. "Oh look, it's one of the lovebirds."

My eyes widened. "Who told you?"

"I ran into Tommy a few minutes ago."

I was still bewildered. How did Tommy already know?

"Soâ€|" Bella said, giving me a look, "How's Jet?"

I felt the sly smile before it slipped onto my face.

"That good?" she asked.

"Better."

Bella laughed and turned back to the contents of her locker. Watching her pull her history book out and then return it to the bottom shelf (probably realizing we didn't have history today), I remembered something.

"Hey, you wanna come over to my house this afternoon to start working on that history project due in two weeks?" I don't normally start projects so early, but I had alternative reason for wanting Bella to come over after schoolâ€"and it had nothing to do with her being a mermaid. Having Bella at my house meant I could temporarily dodge the many questions my family would throw at me once Cole relayed the information that Jet and I were now dating. And, I knew some of those questions would involve shapeshifting, i.e. Bella couldn't be there.

Bella thought for a minute. "Yeah," she said, "that works for me." The warning bell sounded across the whole campusâ€"letting everyone know they only had five minutes to get to class.

"Great. Just meet me outside by my Jeep at the end of the day."

"Okay," she said and then we both headed off to class.

It was as I was walking through the halls that something else struck me. Bella was calling Jet, Jet, not John like all our other friends. No one else had ever tried to call him Jet. I wasn't sure if it was because they didn't understand the nickname or they figured it best if it remained an inside joke between me and him. But Bella was different from the rest of our friends. She referred to him as Jet, just as I did, even if she didn't know where the name came from. I wasn't sure how I felt about it. Calling John Jet had always been my thing, and it didn't feel quite right hearing someone else refer to

him like that. But, at the same time, I didn't want to lay claim to something as silly as a nickname, I already had Jet himself. I didn't need anything else. Besides, Bella was friends with both of usâ€"she could call Jet whatever she liked.

I noticed that there were still a lot of people in the halls, even though we now had only two minutes to get to class. I tried to weave my way through the crowds but as I did people's eyes followed me. In fact, a lot of people simply stopped and stared at me. Did I have something on my face? Had I sat in something? No, that couldn't be itâ€"I hadn't sat down since I had gotten out of my car.

It was only when I caught a snippet of some girl's conversation that I realized why everyone was staring at me.

"That's her," the girl said to her friend, "That's the girl who's dating John Holten."

"I thought they were just friends," the girl's friend replied.

"That's what I thought too, until Sarah said she saw them making out in the parking lot earlier."

I was both elated and disturbed at the same time. The memory of Jet kissing me this morning made my heart swell but the idea that this news seemed to have already spread throughout the entire student body made my nose wrinkle in disgust. It had been, what? Fifteen minutes at most? It was like my social status had skyrocketed in that time, all because of one kiss.

But the better question was why did so many people care? Had there really been that many girls pining over Jet? I mean, I always knew there were a fair number of freshmen girls who liked himâ€"Bella and I had made of point of making fun of them the other day in gymâ€"but other girls too? From the amount of whispers that followed me, it seemed that at least half the school's female population had been crushing on Jet. And, if that were the case, then I was in some serious trouble.

## 16. Exposed

By the end of the day I had never hated gossip more. In every class I overheard people talking about me, Jet, or both of us together.

During second period there was a rumor going around that Jet and I had already agreed to go to prom together in two years. By third period there was a rumor that Jet had slept in my bedroom last night (which had actually happened many times before but not last nightâ€"Jet had gone home after dinner). Come lunch there was a rumor that I wasn't a virgin because I had successfully fooled some college guy into thinking I was 21. That particular rumor had Cole glaring down at me for a good five minutes before I convinced him it wasn't true.

The rumor going around during fourth period was that Jet had hooked up with Diana Melborne in the girl's locker room during lunch, which I immediately knew wasn't true since I had spent all of lunch either

next to him at the table or on his lap. I figured Diana herself had been the one to start that rumor. Come fifth period Jet and I were engaged, but by the end of the day we had broken up.

I didn't bother looking around for Jet after school (he told me he needed to stay after for a meeting anyway), nor did I listen for any mention of his name. I didn't want to hear anymore rumors about either of us. I was so frustrated that I almost forgot I was supposed to wait for Bella. I had already shoved the gearshift in reverse when there was a light tap at my passenger side window and Bella's face appeared.

She pulled the door open and hopped in, buckling her seatbelt as I backed out of the parking space. "Sorry I'm late," she said, "It took me like three tries to get my locker open."

"It's okay," I replied. I wasn't about to tell her that I had almost forgotten about our plans—the plans I had made.

"So, I was trying to think of any interesting historical events we could use as a topic for our project, but unfortunately I don't have a lot of knowledge when it comes to American History." Bella pulled her bag onto her lap. It looked a whole lot heavier than usual. "Which is why I checked out a bunch of books from the library. As long as you pick the topic I can start on the research." She patted her overloaded bag for emphasis.

I laughed at her. "I think I can live with that. I guess bouncing from country to country makes it hard to remember the history of each," I said.

Bella nodded. "The only thing I can remember about American History is the Revolutionary War, and that was fought against England, right?"

"Right," I said, "and you said you didn't know anything about U.S. history..."

"The U.S.? Where's that?"

We both laughed. We continued talking all the way to my house. Bella told me more stories about the places she had lived, and this time, I could better see the appeal of Bella's favorite places such as Greece and Ireland—I could only imagine how beautiful the waters were, let alone what it might be like to swim in them.

When we got to my house I pulled the car as far forward as possible and that was when I noticed someone sitting on my back step. It was Jet. At first, I was happily surprised to see him—I mean who wouldn't be happy to see their boyfriend? Actually, I realized that there had never been a time when part of me wasn't happy to see Jet—maybe that was the part of me that had always had feelings for him.

What was he doing here? He told me he had to stay after school today, and yet there he was sitting on my back porch like it was any ordinary day—he was shirtless and barefoot. This was not good.

"What's Jet doing here?" Bella asked me.

I turned the car off. "Umm, he comes over a lot?" I said, although it came out sounding more like a question.

Jet's voice carried through the closed car doors. "There you are, Mar," he said, "Took you long enough. Come on! My legs are itching for a good race."

It was then that I realized he couldn't see Bella in the seat next to me, either because of the angle of the car or the glare from the afternoon sun. He thought I was alone. This definitely wasn't good.

He started walking off towards the woods.

I should have opened the car door to stop him. I should have called out to him. I should have told Bella to get out of the car so he would see her. But I did none of those thingsâ€"I couldn'tâ€"I was frozen against my seat.

"What is he doing?" Bella asked, squinting her eyes to see if she was in fact seeing what she thought she was.

I knew exactly what she was seeingâ€"Jet unbuttoning his shorts. In the next minute they had dropped to the floor and he was standing in the yard in nothing but his boxers. This wouldn't have fazed me had I not known he would soon be standing completely naked in the grass.

"Oh wow," Bella said, "Umm, are you guysâ€"? Do you twoâ€"??" She looked to me, grappling to find the words she seemed to rather not say.

I gave her a confused look until I realized what she was talking about. "Oh! No, no. Definitely not." I managed to say.

Her eyes moved back to Jet who, like I predicted, was completely naked. She immediately looked down, but then to me and then back up to Jet. It seemed her eyes couldn't stay in one placeâ€"they bounced between Jet, the floor of the car, and me.

My eyes, on the other hand, stayed focused on Jet, willing him to see Bella, put his clothes back on (although I didn't really mind the view), or, at the very least, not shift. Unfortunately, I still had a lot of practicing to do when it came to my telepathy because in the next few seconds Bella and I watched as Jet shifted into the beautiful black wolf I had come to love, and had actually bitten a few times. This was exponentially not good.

The wolf stopped at the edge of the forest and turned back to the car. He was probably wondering what was taking me so long. Boy was he in for a surprise.

Very slowly I opened the door and stepped out of my Jeep. Bella did the same on the other side. I felt like I was navigating a dream. Even from a hundred feet away I could see Jet's muscles tense and his eyes widen in fear when he finally noticed Bella.

I began walking towards him and I could hear Bella following behind

me. I wondered what was going through her head. She just saw this guy transform into an animal—something she probably previously thought to be impossible. I imagined she felt basically the same way I had when I found her lying on the bathroom floor with an orange tail attached to her waist. I snuck a peek in her direction—the expression on her face made her look curious? I couldn't be sure.

Together we walked all the way to the edge of the trees where Jet was still standing, on all fours. Again, Bella couldn't seem to decide who to focus her attention on. Jet was the same way—he looked from me to Bella and then back to me, but he didn't change back.

Bella looked down at Jet, and, smiling hesitantly, she said, "I think I understand where the nickname Jet came from."

### 17. Cloud Nine

The three of us seemed to be frozen in place—not one taking their eyes off the other two. Jet looked like he was afraid to move while I was simply shocked by Bella's reaction—she was almost gleeful.

"You don't look very surprised, Marina," Bella said, glancing in my direction before moving her eyes back on Jet.

For the third time that day I didn't say anything when someone talked to me. I simply turned around and walked across the lawn—picking up Jet's boxers and shorts—and then back to where Jet and Bella were still standing. Jet shifted back and I silently handed him his clothes while Bella averted her eyes. He then started walking back towards the house, without saying a word to either of us. Naturally, we followed him. Well, we followed him until he disappeared in the house.

I was just outside the back door, when I turned to face Bella.

"So, are you going to tell me what's going on or not?" she asked.

I gestured for her to take a seat at the round picnic table on the porch. "Yes," I said and took a deep breath. Why did this seem so much harder with Bella than it had been with Jet? Probably because what I told Jet about shapeshifters actually pertained to him, while it had absolutely nothing to do with Bella, other than what she had just witnessed. "You see Jet, he's—he's a shapeshifter." I paused to catch her reaction, but she didn't give one. "And so am I."

I began telling her some of the things I knew about shapeshifters, starting with what two animals I could turn into. Jet reappeared while I was explaining how if you don't shift before 15 your body forces you to. He didn't offer up that that was how he discovered he was a shapeshifter—he didn't say a word. He was probably mad that Bella knew his secret but he still didn't know hers. So, instead, he just stood behind me, his hand resting on my shoulder as I talked.

When I was finished giving her the abridged version of what it is to be a shapeshifter—carefully avoiding any details that might lead her to believe anyone else in my family were shapeshifters too—I

leaned back in the chair and placed my hand on top of Jet's. He swiftly slid his hand out from under mine and held it instead, rubbing his thumb over my skin.

Looking at Bella, I realized I was in a secret triangle—Jet knew my secret, Bella knew our secrets, and I knew Bella's secret. The only one who didn't know both of the others' secrets was Jet, and that really wasn't fair.

"There's something else," I said to Bella.

"What is it?"

I took a deep breath and squeezed Jet's hand. "I know your secret." I could tell that Bella was definitely surprised by this bit of information, but this time, she was the one who didn't say anything. "I first saw you the other day when I was swimming, but I didn't know it was you then," I said, "but when I followed you into the bathroom yesterday I easily put the two together."

Bella took me by surprise when she started laughing. "I always knew the bathroom was the worst place to hide," she said.

"Have you always been this way?" The words were out of my mouth before I even knew I was speaking, but Bella was unfazed by my question.

She shook her head. "No. I was turned in a cave in Ireland when I was nine."

"I'm guessing that's why your favorite place is Ireland, huh?"

She smiled and nodded. "What about you? Have you always been a shapeshifter?"

"Yeah, we're born this way," I said, and, glancing up at Jet, added, "whether we know it or not." I was about to ask Bella another question about being a mermaid when Jet interrupted—speaking for the first time since he had called me to join him in the woods.

"What exactly are you?" He asked Bella. Could he have been any blunter?

Bella seemed a bit taken aback by his question—she probably assumed I had told him when I discovered her—but she quickly recovered. "A mermaid," she said simply.

I looked up at Jet's shocked face and smiled. "I told you I saw a mermaid."

He narrowed his eyes at me. Lightly shoving my shoulder, he sat down in the chair to my left. "Yeah, yeah. Shut up," he said.

"Hey, watch it," Bella said playfully, "that's your girlfriend you're talking to."

"Yeah," I said, echoing her tone, "I'm your girlfriend."

Jet only smiled. "That you are," he said and leaned in to give me a

kiss.

I allowed a quick peck before I turned back to Bellaâ€"afraid she might feel uncomfortable, but she was still smiling at us.  
"Soâ€|about that history project?"

For the next few weeks, everything was perfect. Jet was turning out to be the best boyfriend everâ€"not that I had any doubt he wouldn'tâ€"and my parents had no problem with us dating. Bella and I were the best of friends and we took every chance we got to go swimming together. Jet and I had become Bella's personal water barriers, so there were no more incidents during lunch or Chemistry. And, probably most importantly, there hadn't been anymore reports on suicidal people with milky eyes. I was practically on cloud nine.

I should have known it wouldn't last.

Everything was normal until lunch. I took what had become my usual seatâ€"between Jet and Bellaâ€"and started eating the sandwich I brought with me. The topic of conversation at the table was hockeyâ€"the only sport I actually knew anything about since Cole had played for five years before starting varsity in high school. Bella, on the other hand, had no clue what hockey was other than that it was played on ice. I went back and forth between explaining something to her and participating in the conversation.

Had Connor been talking non-stop, I wouldn't have noticed anything was off, but he wasn't. For the first time ever, Connor was completely silent, while the rest of us talked about his favorite sport.

I glanced at him curiouslyâ€"was he even listening to the conversation? The topic had even turned specifically to his favorite team, the Kings. Surely something was wrong with him if he didn't pipe in now. The first time I met Connor he was wearing a L.A. Kings hat, and ever since then it was hard to find him not wearing one. I looked around the table to see if anyone else noticed Connor's odd behavior.

They hadâ€"Tommy was staring at his best friend like the guy had completely lost his mind. He didn't say anything to Connor, he just watched him, as if he were watching an animal act at the zoo, wondering what he might do next.

I did the sameâ€"switching between Connor and Tommyâ€"afraid that I might miss something if I only focused on one of them. The only problem was that Bella kept breaking my concentration to ask another question about hockey. Didn't she realize something was wrong with Connor? No, of course she didn't. She had only known Connor for a little whileâ€"she didn't know he was an avid hockey fanâ€"although I'm pretty sure she could have guessed based on his numerous hockey shirts and hats.

It was when I looked back over to Tommy after Bella's third question that I noticed the changeâ€"Tommy's expression had changed from curiosity to one of worry and fear. My eyes quickly found Connor, wondering what was wrong. I stopped breathing when I realized what I was seeing. Connor's eyes had changed colors. They were no longer the normal blue-gray, but coated overtop of his pupils and irises was a cloudy-white substance.

No no no no no. Connor could not be possessedâ€"not one of my friends. He could not die like that woman.

My eyes found Tommy again and this time he was staring back at me. He knew I knew there was something wrong with Connor. But the question was, what did he know? Based on his reaction, he had definitely seen the haze in his friend's eyes (which had not conveniently disappeared), but did he know what it meant? Could he possibly even know more about it than I did? I recalled the way he had protected Bella from water during lunch a couple weeks back. It had seemed like he knew it would cause her to grow a tail. And now he knew that Connor having milky eyes meant something bad? Exactly how much did Tommy know?

I watched both Connor and Tommy out of the corner of my eye for the rest of the period. If Connor was going to be possessed to kill himself he would have a hard time doing it in school, so I wasn't too worried about him when lunch ended. Also, if Tommy did know what was going on then he would most certainly be looking out for his best friend.

I stopped at my locker with Jet before our next class, hoping we wouldn't need our chemistry books later because I wasn't lugging the giant thing around for the next two hours. When I pulled my algebra folder out a small piece of paper dropped to the floor. I picked it up and unfolded it. Inside it read:

\_Marina\_

\_Meet me after school in the library. Tell John and Bella to come too.\_

\_Tommy\_

"What's that?" Jet asked, leaning over my shoulder to get a glimpse of the note in my hand.

"A note from Tommy," I said, "He wants us to meet him after school."

Jet frowned. "I wonder why."

"Me too," I said as I stood up and closed my locker door, even though I already had a good idea why.

## 18. More Supernatural Secrets

Jet and I met Bella at her locker after school before heading into the library to find Tommy.

"Why do you think he wants to meet us?" Bella asked.

"I don't know," Jet said, "but it is definitely weird."

"How so?" Bella said.

"Do you really think it's a coincidence that he asked the three of us?" Jet looked around to make sure everyone else was out of earshot,

"Two shapeshifters and a mermaid?"

Bella suddenly looked worried. "Do you think we should just go home?"

"Of course not," I said, "Tommy is our friend. We can trust him." Bella and Jet both nodded in agreement.

Tommy had always been one of those really personable people. Everyone liked him. I didn't know one person who had a problem with Tommy. Even if he did know all of our secrets (which I highly doubted), I could never believe that he would betray us.

"Besides, I think this is about Connor being possessed." I said.

"Are you sure he was possessed?" Bella asked.

"I'm sure," I said as we pushed open the doors to the library, "and, as far as we know, he is possessed. I don't know how or when a person stops being possessed once they are." A kid sitting at the nearest table gave me a strange look as we passed by--he probably overheard the last part of our conversation.

Tommy was sitting at a table at the very back of the library, yards away from anyone else in the large room. He had a very thick book open in front of him--it looked like an encyclopedia from the reference section, only there wasn't a call number on it--the book wasn't from the library.

Jet led the way to the back table and the three of us filled in the empty chairs around Tommy.

"Hey, guys," Tommy said, looking up from the book.

"What's this about, man?" Jet asked.

"Before we get to that, there is something I have to confess," Tommy said, lowering his voice, "and please don't take this the wrong way."

"What is it?" Bella asked.

"I know that each of you are--well, you're not exactly normal," Tommy said.

Jet frowned at Tommy but we neither confirmed nor denied what he was saying. Both Bella and I shifted uncomfortably in our chairs.

When Tommy didn't continue talking, I jumped in, unable to stand the uncertainty hanging in the air, "What are you saying?"

Tommy glanced between the three of them. "I'm saying that I know you and John are shapeshifters and that Bella is a mermaid."

Surprisingly, Bella was the first to speak. "I don't know what you're talking about."

I glanced at Tommy's face and somehow knew that trying to deny it

further was futile. So, I didn't say anything. I couldn't. Jet had been rightâ€"Tommy knew each of our secrets. But how? I had been raised since birth to protect my family's secret, no matter what. I knew all the tricks, all the excuses and explanationsâ€"anything I would need to keep the fact that I was a shapeshifter a secret. And Jet had learned all of that last year. It was something he took very seriously, and, except for the slipup with Bella, had always been extremely careful. I knew that Bella's secret was a bit more difficult to keep under wraps, since she had no control over changing once water hit her skin, but she had certainly learned to cope over the past seven years. So, the question was, how did Tommy find out?

Jet seemed to be thinking along the same lines. "How?" he asked Tommy, his voice suddenly taking on a very defensive tone. He inched his seat closer to mine, resting his hand on my thigh as if to tell me things were going to be okay.

"I knew as soon as I met you," Tommy said.

"That doesn't answer the question," I pointed out.

Tommy nodded, trying to say he already knew that but it was part of his explanation, so I was quiet. "Everyone who is supernaturalâ€"in whatever way that may beâ€"has an aura," Tommy started.

"What's anâ€"" Bella interrupted but Tommy quickly cut her off, already anticipating her question.

"An aura is a type of light that surrounds you body. Sometimes it can make your skin look like it is glowing. The color of a person's aura depends on what type of supernatural they are," Tommy explained.

"Does everyone have these different colors swirling around them?" Bella asked.

"No, humans don't. Only those of us who are supernatural have colorful auras," Tommy said, "Shapeshifters' auras tend to be multicolored since they can change their appearance, and I recently learned that mermaids' auras are a light turquoise color."

"So, you knew each of us wereâ€|supernatural," it felt weird using the word describe ourselves, "because you were able to see these auras that surround us?" I asked.

Tommy nodded. "I have to admit that I didn't know what you guys were at first. I had to do a bit of research before I discovered that a multicolored aura meant shapeshifter and a turquoise one meant mermaid."

"But how can you see them?" Jet asked, "I'm sitting about a foot away from both Marina and Bella but I don't see any so-called aura. And no one has ever come up to me and said, 'dude, I think you're glowing'."

I stifled my laugh at Jet's "cool kid" impersonation, but he didn't notice. He was too concerned with Tommy to worry about me laughing at him. But I wasn't. For some reason, Tommy knowing our secret didn't really bother me. If anything, it made me happierâ€"it was one less

person I had to hide my true self from.

"Only other supernaturals can see someone's aura," Tommy said, then quickly added, "but you have to be trained to see it."

The three of us all seemed to accept Tommy's justification--it did explain why none of us were able to see the auras--but, I realized, it didn't explain why Tommy could see them. "What are you, then?" I asked him.

"What?" Tommy said, caught off guard by my question. For some reason, he seemed to think that particular question wouldn't come up.

"You said that only other supernaturals can see auras, and you also said that you were able to see all three of our auras," I gestured to Bella, Jet and myself, "so what kind of supernatural are you?"

Bella and Jet stared at Tommy--all three of us keenly interested in what he would say next.

Tommy sighed, giving in. "A sorcerer," he said.

I was surprised--much as I had been when Bella told me that being a mermaid didn't just mean she had a tail, but that she also had a special power over water. I had been unable to conceal my gasp that day when my cup of water turned from plain liquid to a jelly substance and then to one similar to glass. Today was no different--okay, I managed not to gasp, but I certainly didn't know sorcerers existed. Although, after meeting a mermaid, I should have known we weren't the only supernaturals out there.

"Like with spells and magic wands?" Jet asked, skeptically. He was giving Tommy his "I-think-you're-crazy-look" that he gave me when I told him I saw a mermaid in the ocean.

But Tommy didn't seem to notice Jet's reaction, either that or he didn't care. "Spells yes, wands no."

"Cool," Bella said.

I would have echoed her opinion had something else not been bothering me. "If you've known that I am a shapeshifter since you met me, why didn't you say something sooner?"

"Honestly? I was afraid of what you would think of me. I may know a lot about supernatural stuff, but when it comes to the actual magic part of being a sorcerer I'm pretty useless," Tommy admitted. "I can't even levitate a stupid chair."

Levitating anything seemed pretty awesome in my mind. "You can't be that bad," I said, trying to lift his spirits, "you're practically amazing at everything else you do." And I wasn't lying. Tommy was not only a straight-A student but he was also a starter on both the soccer team and the baseball team, as only a sophomore. And, like I said before, everyone loved him cause he was basically the nicest guy in the world. Based on everything that I already knew about Tommy, I had a hard time believing he would be bad at anything, even magic.

"Thanks Marina," Tommy said.

"So, why did you have us meet you here?" Jet asked, "It couldn't have been simply to tell us that you know all our secrets."

"No, you're right," Tommy said, "I asked you guys to meet me because I think there is something wrong with Connor. I think he might be possessed."

I knew it. Jet wasn't the only one who had been right about Tommy's motives. I immediately jumped in, agreeing with Tommy and then going on to explain the woman I had almost hit on my way home a couple weeks ago. "I think it is the same person, or thing, controlling Connor that was controlling that womanâ€¦well, until she died," I said, my voice fading out.

Tommy nodded in agreement. "I was hoping you guys might have an idea of what kind of supernatural could do such a thing."

"You definitely think someone supernatural is doing this?" Bella asked.

"Yeah," Tommy said, "who else could?"

We all shruggedâ€"none of us could come up with any alternatives. "The only supernaturals I know that are real are shapeshifters and mermaidsâ€¦and now sorcerers," I said, nodding to Tommy.

"Same," Jet said.

"Well, just because we don't know if something is real doesn't mean it's not out there," Bella said, placing her hands on the wooden table, "there are tons of legends and books about sea monsters and vampires and ghosts and stuff like that. Who says they're not real? I mean, the stories must come from somewhere, right?"

I thought about it. Bella had a point. What if whatever it is that's possessing people is actually something out of some fantasy book? I mean, technically, each one of us were in some sort of fantasy or science fiction storyâ€"maybe the story didn't have the details quite right, but the idea was there. It definitely seemed possible that this person with the ability to control others was something I might have read about before.

"You're right," I told Bella, "I think the only way we are going to figure out how to stop this person from controlling others if we know what it is, which meansâ€""

Turning around in his seat to face the shelves of books behind him and smiling, Tommy finished my sentence, "Which means we have a bit of research to do."

## 19. Myths and Legends

Jet groaned for about the tenth time in the last hour as he closed yet another book. I knew that this was not how he wanted to spend his afternoonâ€"it wasn't my idea of a perfect day either. I checked the time on my cell phone. It was almost seven o'clock. We had been at the library looking through all the fantasy and science fiction books we could find for over three hours. Originally, I thought that we

would get through the books in an hour, maybe two tops, especially with four of us working through them, but, after glancing back at the shelf, I quickly realized we weren't going to finish them at all tonight. After three hours we were barely halfway through. Who knew the library had such an abundant supply of books on myths, legends, and just plain old fantasies?

My eyes scanned the room. We were the only students left except for one kid at table near the librarian's desk, and, based on the way the woman shot a scrutinizing look at the kid every five minutes, I knew he wasn't here by choice. His fingers erratically tapped a half-chewed pencil on the table top while his eyes focused on the book in front of him, but he wasn't reading. His eyes bore down on one spot of the book--he never turned the page, he never even moved his eyes across the page that was open.

Fifteen kids had left since Jet, Bella, Tommy and I started doing our unassigned research. Each time I heard the familiar whoosh of a chair sliding across the carpet my eyes would instinctively look up to see who was leaving the silent sanctuary and reentering the outside world. Instead of counting the number of books I had gone through I began counting the number of people who got to escape before me. It wasn't the smartest thing to do, because with every shuffle of feet I envied the departing person more and more.

I sighed and closed my book as well. I looked up at my friends. Jet was standing at the shelf, running his finger along the line of books. If I wanted to I could have easily sculpted the muscles of his back right then and there. They looked so smooth and inviting through his white t-shirt. I wanted nothing more than to walk up behind him and run my hand along his back. Had we not been in public I probably would have.

"What about a fairy?"

"Hmm?" I said, snapping out of my daydream and turning my attention over to Bella. She had a small book with a light green cover open in front of her.

"A fairy?" Jet repeated, turning back around to face us. He didn't sound convinced. I was starting to realize that Jet needed a fair amount of persuasion when it came to believing anything supernatural.

"Does it say anything about them being able to control other people?" Tommy asked.

Bella scanned the pages. "Umm, not exactly," she said, then pointing to paragraph on a page, even though none of us could see what was written from where we were sitting (or standing), "but it does say something about them spraying dust that makes people's minds go all fuzzy."

"Fuzzy?" Jet said, in much the same tone he had said the word "fairy". He was frowning, again. Had he been anyone other than Jet I would have said something about him needing to be careful his face didn't freeze that way. But, a frown, or any expression for that matter, was swoon-worthy on Jet's face.

"Her mind definitely wasn't fuzzy. The woman I met on the road I

mean," I clarified.

"But didn't you say she didn't seem to know how she got there?" Bella asked.

"Yeah, but her eyes weren't milky then. They only got hazy when it seemed that she did know where she was and what she was doing, which was probably when she was being controlled." I stood up and placed the book I was holding back on the shelf where I found it. Jet and I then sat back down together, both of us not bothering to pick up another book.

"Should we put fairy on our list, just in case?" Tommy asked.

"Why not," I shrugged. Our list really wasn't much. We had maybe three things on the list, including the fairy, and none of them were really very good candidates for what kind of supernatural could control other people.

"I really think it's a vampire," Tommy said, looking over our list again before writing fairy at the bottom.

Jet shook his head. "It's not a vampire."

"How do you know?"

"I've never heard of a vampire controlling someone. Biting their neck? Sure, but not controlling people," Jet said.

"Umm, actually, I have," I admitted.

"Where?"

"In The Vampire Diaries," I said sheepishly. All three of my friends raised their eyebrows at me. "They call it compelling," I explained, "all a vampire has to do is look into someone's eyes and they will do what he says."

"But did the compelled person's eyes turn a milky white color?" Jet asked.

"No," I said. He had me there.

Jet frowned again. "We're getting nowhere here. I think we need to try a different angle."

"Maybe we should focus on how to get Connor back to normal instead," Bella suggested.

Then something dawned on me—"something I should have realized a lot sooner. "Ohmigod!" I exclaimed, "Connor!"

Raising one eyebrow, Jet asked, "What about him?"

"While we're in here, trying to figure out what is causing this, Connor could be out there trying to kill himself like that woman!" I pushed my chair out and stood up. We had to leave. We had to find Connor.

"Hold up," Tommy said, his voice surprising calm, "Connor is

fine."

"How do you know?"

"I told Grace that the girl Connor has a crush on just got a new boyfriend," Tommy smiled mischievously. "She said she would keep an eye on him."

Jet and I both laughed. Not only was Grace infamous for her love of gossip, but, whenever someone was down or "out of sorts", she was also quite smothering. I would have bet that Connor didn't get one moment alone the whole time we've been at the library.

"I think we should call it a night anyway," Tommy said, "John's right. We need to look someplace else."

"Finally," Jet muttered under his breath so only I could hear him. I gave him a small smile and took his hand. He squeezed my hand in return. The four of us packed up our things and put the remaining books away. I smiled at the librarian at the checkout counter but all she gave me was a sigh of relief. With the four of us leaving she probably got to go home early too.

As we walked out of the library, I asked Jet, "You running home or do you want a ride?" I could see Jet weighing his options just by looking at him.

"I think I'll run, if that's okay," He said.

"Sure," I said, "I'll see you tomorrow morning then?"

He smiled. "Yeah. Have a goodnight." He leaned down and gave me a quick kiss before running off towards the shaded woods.

"Do you need a ride, Bella?" I asked.

"Yeah, that'd be great," she said. Tommy waved goodbye to the two of us and walked to the other side of the parking lot where his own car was parked. Bella and I threw our bags in the backseat and hopped in my Jeep. I pulled out of the parking space and was about to turn right to take Bella home when, in my rearview mirror I saw Jet running towards us. I stopped the car. Both Bella and I turned around in our seats and frowned. What was he doing? Did he want a ride after all?

"Marina!" he shouted, "Wait!"

I unbuckled my seatbelt and jumped down out of my seat. "What is it? What are you doing?"

"Come here! You need to see this," he said.

Since there was no one else left in the parking lot, I left my car where it was and followed Jet to the tree line. "What is it, Jet? I have to get Bella home."

"Look," he said and pointed to the ground. There in the dirt were footprints. "I think they're the same ones that were over by the stream. What if whoever is leaving them is responsible for controlling Connor and that woman?"

It was definitely a possibility. I stared at the footprints. They looked like they belonged to a young woman. "We should see where they lead," I said.

"Alright, let's go then." Jet was already tearing off his t-shirt. I did the same. Once we had both shifted, I carefully collected our clothing in my mouth and ran back to Bella, who was still sitting in my car. I tossed the clothes in the back with our bags and then standing near the passenger door, I shifted back to my human form to talk to Bella.

"Can you drive?" I asked her.

"Yeah, but I don't have my license yet," she said, "What's going on, Marina?"

"Don't worry about the license. My dad's a cop. Just obey the speed limits and you'll be fine," I told her, "Jet found some footprints over there by the woods and we're going to follow them. He thinks they might be connected to whatever is controlling people."

"What do you need me to do?"

"Remember that hidden beach where Jet and I found you a couple weeks ago?" I asked. Bella nodded. "I need you to drive my Jeep out there. Jet and I will meet you there."

"Okay," she said and slid over into the driver's seat. I shifted back to my wolf and turned to leave. "Oh, and, Marina?" Bella called to me, causing me to turn back around. "Be careful." I gave her a short nod to show that I understood before racing back across the parking lot to Jet.

## 20. Close

Jet and I ran through the woods, tracking the footprints. At first they led away from the school, more inland than anything, but then they seemed to cut back, more towards the beach. I followed Jet all the way through the forest beside the school, through the sparse trees behind Main Street, and even through the trees that we had only raced through together yesterday. It was then that I realized where the footprints were heading back to the spot where we first saw them—the bottom of the small canyon that Jet fell into. Of course, I couldn't communicate this to Jet, but I was sure he suspected the same thing. He knew these trees as well as I did now.

We ran and ran. The further we ran the more I became convinced that whoever was leaving these footprints was supernatural. It seemed next to impossible for a person to walk as far as the footprints indicated, especially barefoot. A few times the footprints disappeared onto a sidewalk or street but we were always able to pick them back up a few yards ahead.

As we got closer and closer to the canyon and the small stream, a strange scent began to fill me. I took a deep breath in. It smelled like salt water, but I knew it wasn't the ocean. Both Jet and I could smell the ocean from anywhere when we were in our wolf forms. But this salty scent, it was different, stronger even. It too seemed to

follow the line of footprints. What was this thing we were tracking? I let out a short howl, hoping Jet would know I was trying to point out the smell. He howled back at me and picked up the pace, racing through the trees as if we might be able to catch our prey at the end of its trail. And who knew? We could. I just hoped that we could handle whatever we found at the end of it, if we found anything at all.

We reached the edge of the canyon and something came into my line of vision—a something close to that small stream where the original footprints had been. I couldn't tell what it was, but the sun seemed to reflect off of it. I gave a soft bark, so only Jet could hear—and continued forward, not bothering to slow my momentum despite the steep hill. As we got closer the salty smell got stronger and I saw that the thing looked like a woman—the shape of her body was clearly feminine—but she wasn't made of flesh and blood. She was made entirely of water. Where her hair would have been long lines of water flew out behind her, small drops coming off the ends. She turned to face us, and I was awed by her appearance. Even though it was strange to see water in such a clearly defined shape, she was quite beautiful. But when she saw us barreling towards her (well I assumed she saw us, I couldn't make out any eyes on her face), she dove head first into the stream. I'm not kidding. This water-woman dove head first into about twelve inches of water, and disappeared.

Jet and I reached the stream just as her feet melted into the rest of the flowing water. I immediately shifted back. "We have to go after her," I said.

Jet didn't shift. He just stared at me, as if to say "what's the point?" And he was right. The woman was made of water, and now she was in water. We would never be able to separate the two. But we had to try. We couldn't lose her—for Connor's sake.

"Come on," I told him, "we'll follow the current."

We took off running again, this time I was in the lead. We ran along the stream, trying to keep up with this water woman as best we could. Every so often I caught a glimpse of a shimmer in the water but I could only hope that it was her. Honestly I didn't know if it was or wasn't. We continued running, even when the stream turned into a brook and even when that brook turned into a river. When river turned to ocean, I skidded to a halt on a rocky cliff. We lost her. I lied down on the cliff and put my head on top of my paws—watching the waves of the ocean crash on the shore below. I looked down at the water beneath me—it really wasn't that far—I could probably jump. I lifted my head. I could jump off the cliff and then while I was falling shift into my dolphin form and find the water-woman and catch her. I stood up and backed away from the ledge (it was probably best to get a running start).

"Don't even think about it, Marina," came a voice from behind me. I turned to see Jet walking out of the trees and practically melted at the sight of him—God, he could have been a god. I hadn't even realized I had lost him while chasing the woman. I turned back around. I couldn't get distracted now. I still had to go after the water-woman. I had to find her so we could save Connor. I took a step towards the edge of the cliff.

"I mean it, Marina," Jet said, "You have no idea how deep that water is down there. You could jump and hit your head on the bottom and drown. Or it could be full of jagged rocks that'll break your bones before you even have time to register the fact that you've hit something."

I still ignored him. Didn't he get it? That woman was our only chance of finding out what was happening to Connor and how to fix him. I took another step forward.

Jet rushed towards me and wrapped his arms around my furry neck. I didn't bother trying to struggle out of his grip. Deep down, I knew he was right. "I can't lose you, Marina," he whispered in my ear. I sat down on the rock and shifted back, wrapping my arms around my bent knees.

"We lost her," I said so softly I didn't think he heard me.

But he did. "Better her than you," he said as he brushed a stray piece of hair from my face. I leaned into him, resting my head against his hard chest. He held me there for awhile before either of us said anything.

"What if we can't figure it out? What if we can't fix this?" I asked him, my voice muffled against the warmth of his skin--which was a good thing, because I was on the verge of tears.

Okay, I admit it. I wasn't on the verge of tears, I was full out crying. My tears were creating streaks against Jet's tanned skin. I wanted to hide--I didn't want him to see me like this--but burrowing my face further into his already damp chest would only make him feel the wetness of my tears more. I'm not normally like this. I hardly ever cry, honestly. But, I guess the sight of the vast ocean--with no visible end on any side--I got a bit overwhelmed. I didn't want to lose a friend, or anyone else.

"Don't worry," he said, "we will." His words soothed me, but didn't ease my doubts.

"How do you know?"

"I just do." He leaned down and kissed the top of my head.

"We should probably go," I said, looking up at him, "Bella will be waiting for us."

He nodded and, taking a finger, he gently wiped a tear out from under my eye. Together we stood up and shifted back into our wolf forms. Jet let me lead the way back to the beach where Bella was supposed to meet us. Tomorrow, I vowed to myself, we would go back to that canyon and see what else we could find. Even though I knew there was only a small chance, I hoped that we would find the water-woman there once again.

The next morning I pulled in to the school parking lot determined. I had a plan, and all I had to do was communicate that plan to Jet when I saw the black wolf emerge from the forest and I could hand him his clothes. I was about to pull neatly into a parking spot when I saw Bella running towards me. The look on her face was easy to identify--sheer horror.

"Marina!" she shouted. She ran up to the side of my Jeep and clung to the door, breathing a sigh of relief. "I'm so glad you're here."

"What is it, Bella?" I asked, "What's wrong?"

"Everyone," she breathed.

I frowned. "Everyone what?"

"Their eyes," she said, "Almost everyone's--teachers and students--their eyes have that milky covering. They're all possessed!"

"Get in the car," I said, not bothering to ask any more questions. Practically slamming the gearshift in reverse, I backed away from the other cars and sped back towards the entrance to the school. When I caught a glimpse of black fur in between some trees to my right, I pressed down hard on my brake causing a nerve rattling screech to fill the air. But nobody noticed. There were very few people who even looked over. Bella must be right, I thought. Everyone must really be possessed if I wasn't attracting their attention.

Shoving the car in park, I hopped out of the driver's seat and ran around to open the door behind Bella as fast as I could. "Come on," I called to Jet, but it didn't matter--he was already making a beeline for my backseat. With just one leap he was settled on the fabric, and I shut the door behind him. I ran around and jumped back in the driver's seat. I pressed down hard on the gas, paying no attention to the speed limits. I was only worried about getting as far away from school as possible.

## 21. Surrounded

I drove and drove. I didn't even know where I was going. I just drove. Somehow I ended up on the highway. A sign told me I was heading south, but I didn't have any particular destination in mind. All around me normal people--people who weren't possessed (or at least I hoped not)--were making their morning commute to work. It occurred to me that someone might see us and assume we were three kids ditching school to spend the day at the beach--well, two kids and their very large black dog. And while the ditching school part may have been true, we had a perfectly good reason for it.

No one said anything--not that Jet could have since he was still a wolf. No one asked where I was going. No one asked what we should do. Everyone was silent, consumed with their own thoughts. Mine went a little like this:

Oh god. This is bad. This is really bad. Focus on your driving, Marina. But how can we possibly fix this? Who cares? It isn't your responsibility. You could runaway. And leave my family? No way. The road, Marina. What if everyone is stuck like this? What if we can't catch this water-woman, whatever she is? Even if we catch her, how do we stop her? I have no clue. Break, Marina, break!

I slammed on the break just in time. The Jeep screeched to a halt about six inches before the car in front of me. But nobody said

anything. Bella only gripped the door and I saw Jet raise his head from its perch on the open window. That was it. We had almost gotten in an accident but nobody cared. We were all too numb.

I got off the highway at the next exit pulled off the road into the parking lot of a Holiday Inn. "Where should we go?" I asked my best friend and my boyfriend.

"Do either of you want to tell me what is going on?" Jet had shifted back.

Bella turned around to answer him but then quickly faced forward again. She had forgotten that when Jet and I shift back into our human form, our clothing does not magically appear on us like hers does. I was secretly jealous of Bella for that. Shifting would be a lot easier if we didn't have to worry about whether or not we'd be naked. Although, having to strip down did have some advantages, I thought as I sneaked a peek at Jet in my rearview mirror. What? He's my boyfriend, and, when it comes to him I admit that I tend to have very little self-control.

"Almost everyone at the school was possessed," Bella told him, purposely keeping her eyes forward.

In the mirror, I saw Jet freezeâ€"the pair of shorts he had been trying to put on before left dangling at his ankles. "I thought it was bad," he said, "but not that bad."

I watched as his expression changed from one of surprise to one of determination and even a bit of fear. Was Jet actually scared? I couldn't remember the last time I had seen fear on his face. But, no matter how slight, it was definitely there. He let his shorts drop to the floor and he pulled the boxers he had just put on down from around his waist and he shifted back into the black wolf, all in one fluid motion. Apparently, he didn't think it was safe for all three of us to be unprepared for an attack from the water-woman.

"We need someplace to go," I said, "to figure things out." If that was even possible, but I didn't say that.

"We can go to my house," Bella said, "My parents should both be at work so no one will be home."

"Okay." I put my car back in drive and pulled out of the parking lot. "Text Tommy and tell him to meet us there." Bella nodded and took out her phone. I opened the windows in the back and Jet immediately stuck his head outâ€"whether he was trying to keep a look out or if he, like practically every dog, simply enjoyed the sensation of the wind on his face, I didn't know. I didn't take the highway back to town, choosing to take local roads instead.

I should have known to stick to the highway.

At first none of us noticed anything out of the ordinary. It looked like any other normal dayâ€"people were walking in and out of the shops on Main Street, buying clothes or groceries or whatever else they felt they neededâ€"or, at least, that's what I thought. It wasn't until Jet let out a soft whine from the backseat that I realized something was wrong, really wrong. For a second, I wondered if the sound had actually come from himâ€"I didn't think I had ever

heard Jet whine beforeâ€"but then he made the sound again.

"What is it?" I asked, glancing back at him. He whined again and stuck his nose out the window. I followed his gaze to the shoppers on the sidewalk and that was when I noticed itâ€"the occasional flash of white coming from every person's eyes.

Bella, who had been looking out her own window, leaned over to look out mine. "We need to do something," she whispered.

"What?" I asked, just as softly, "We don't even know who is doing this."

"But, Marina," Bella said, "Look around you." She turned her head in the direction of the people on the sidewalks. "Everyone but us is under this thing's control."

"I know." We did have to do something. I didn't even want to think about whether or not my family had been affected by this. I wanted to find that water-woman and see if she's the one responsible.

Bella's phone beeped. "Tommy says he'll meet us there and that he's bringingâ€|a supernatural encyclopedia?" she read skeptically.

I raised my eyebrows at that. A supernatural encyclopedia? Who knew such a thing existed? I wondered if sorcerers have thought to update to the 21st century with their own supernatural search engine.

"Umm, Marina?" Bella said nervously.

"Yeah?"

"You might want to drive faster."

"I can't, the speed limit is only 25 mph."

"I wouldn't worry about that right now," she said, "Look." She pointed to a couple of possessed people who had stepped off the sidewalk and were walking towards our car. From the backseat, Jet let out a low growl. I quickly stepped on the gas before the people could either grab hold of us or dart in front of the Jeep. That was another question: what did the possessed people want? They couldn't all want to kill themselves. In fact, I was sure no one had since that woman on Evergreen Street. Whoever was controlling them must have a reason for doing so. Why take control of innocent people for no reason? I sighedâ€"we had so many questions but absolutely no answers. As I drove out of town I hoped that we would at least find some while at Bella's house.

When we got to her house the three of us hopped out of the Jeep and I grabbed both my bag and the bag of clothes I brought for Jet before following Bella through the front door, which she promptly locked behind us. When we got to Bella's room at the top of the stairs, Jet shifted back and got dressed. Her walls were painted a turquoise color, much like how I imagined her aura looked. She had a rustic white dresser on the wall beside two large bay windows.

Bella sat down on her bed and a now fully dressed Jet leaned against her dresser. I walked over to stand beside Jet. I ran my hand over the top of Bella's dresser, admiring the bits of jewelry she had left

out. Beside the jewelry, in a small ceramic bowl, lay a couple of blue, crystal-like stones. "What are these, Bella?" I asked, pointing to the small stones.

"They're crystals from the cave in Ireland where I turned into a mermaid."

"They're really pretty," I told her.

"I know," she said, "they're my only connection to that place now."

Turning around, I smiled at her and slipped one of the crystals in my pocket without Bella noticing. I had an idea.

"So," Bella said, "what are we going to do?"

"We need to find that water-woman that Marina and I saw yesterday," Jet said, "and then find a way to get everyone back to normal."

Bella's face fell. "And to think, this morning all I wanted was to get out of my English essay on The Odyssey."

I frowned—something Bella said clicked in my head. "Bella," I asked, "is there a part of the story where Odysseus and his crew are almost lured to their deaths by sirens?"

Bella gave me a puzzled look. "Umm, yeah. Why?"

"That's it," I said to a very confused Bella and Jet, "that's what the water-woman is and that is what is controlling everyone. A siren!"

## 22. Siren Sight

"A siren?" Jet asked skeptically. Of course he was skeptic. Knowing he wasn't going to believe me without a substantial amount of proof, I turned to Bella to see what she thought of my theory.

Bella shrugged. "I suppose it's possible."

"But it's not better than any of our other possibilities," Jet pointed out.

"Well, we can test our theories now," Tommy said entering the room carrying a very large, very worn brown book. Now, I'm only guessing, but I would have said that was the "Supernatural Encyclopedia" Bella said he was bringing.

"How'd you get in?" Bella asked, looking slightly panicked, "I thought I locked the door."

"Unlocking doors is the one of the few spells I can do," Tommy said, "but don't worry. I locked it again behind me." Bella nodded. "So what's this new theory Marina's got?"

"She thinks this thing could be a siren," Jet answered.

"Alright, well let me see if siren is in here," Tommy said, plopping the big book down on Bella's bedspread. He opened it to the middle and began flipping through the old, yellowed pages.

I leaned in for a closer look. "What language is that?"

"Latin," Tommy said, not looking up.

"And you can read it?" I asked.

"I can speak it too. All spells and sorcery books are in Latin." Tommy shrugged. "Don't ask me why, cause I have no idea." He stopped flipping through pages and ran his finger down the writing of one. "Here," he said, "Sirenis. It says they're native to the Mediterranean, they are only femaleâ€|blah, blah blahâ€|ah, here! It says that sirens have the ability to control othersâ€"usually males, but they can also control femalesâ€"by using their voices to sing a specific tune and salt water tendrils from their brain."

"Water tendrils from their brain? What the hell does that mean?" Jet asked, not looking very enthused.

Tommy shrugged and looked up. "You got me."

"What else does it say?" I asked, "Does it say anything about them being completely made out of water?"

"Ummâ€|" Tommy eyes darted across the page, speed-reading the section on sirens. "Sirens are known to be able to switch between two forms: one is humanoid and the other isâ€|water?"

"Just like the woman we saw yesterday!" I exclaimed, "She was made of water. It's got to be her."

"Is there anything about people's eyes turning white?" Jet asked.

"Yeah, here at the bottom. It says that those who are controlled by a siren, and are still alive, can be distinguished by the white coating over their eyes," Tommy paraphrased.

"So that's it then?" Bella said, "What we're up against? A siren?"

"I think so," I said.

"Everything seems to fit," Tommy said and began rereading the section on sirens.

"Does it tell us how stop a siren?" Jet asked, "Or how to return a controlled person to normal?"

"There's a spell to get people back to normalâ€|but it looks really complicated." Tommy frowned.

"Do you think you could do it?" I asked him.

He shook his head. "There are things in this that I've never even heard of before."

"So then what do we do?" Bella asked.

"What about this water tendril from the brain thing? Is there anything else about that? Maybe if we figure out what that is we can figure out how to stop it. Cause it sounds like the song and the tendril go hand and hand when it comes to controlling someone," I said, explaining my thinking as best I could.

"I think that makes sense," Bella said, "I mean, the singing part is what is in all the stories."

"It says here that the salt water tendril must travel from brain to brain in order for a connection to be made."

"From brain to brain?" Jet asked, "Does that mean every person who is controlled has a piece of this siren in their brains?"

"I think that's what it means."

"That doesn't mean anything if we can't stop the siren. Even if we can get people back to normal, the siren can just put the water in people's brains and sing her song and they'll be in her control again," Bella pointed out.

"She's right," I said, "but how do we find the siren?"

"And if she's disguising herself in human form how are we going to be able to tell her apart from a normal person?" Jet said.

"You're forgetting that she's a supernatural," Tommy said, "which means that she has an aura."

"But you're the only one who can see auras," Bella said.

"I also said that because you guys are also supernaturals you can be taught to see auras."

"And exactly who is going to teach us?" Jet asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

"I will," Tommy said, closing the giant book in front of him and standing up, "that way each of you will know if you come in contact with the siren in her human form."

"Okay, so what do we have to do?" Bella asked. She stood up and faced Tommy.

"Seeing a person's aura is kind of like trying to see a part of their soul," Tommy explained, "So, first you need observe the person's mannerisms. Take in the way I walk, how I hold my hands, the tone of my voice."

Bella stared intently at Tommy for about a minute, before saying, "Okay, now what?"

"Now I want you to stare into my eyes, only my eyes at first. It doesn't matter if I'm not looking back at you. Once your gaze is locked on my eyes, slowly expand your vision until you can see my whole body. While you are doing that be sure to keep in mind everything you just observed about me. It'll probably help if you

make a point to remember that I \_am \_a supernatural."

Bella nodded and did as he said. Jet and I watched her, eagerly waiting her exclamation of success. "Is your aura red?" Bella asked.

"Yes."

"I can see it!" She exclaimed. She turned to me, smiling. "Can I try it on you, Marina?"

"Sure," I said. She watched me for a bit, then stared into my eyes as Tommy instructed. Her eyes widened as her vision encompassed my whole body and I knew she could see it. (Author note- this is my explanation of how Bella knew something magical was going on with Cleo and Rikki in S03E01!)

"Oh wow," she whispered, "You're aura is like a rainbow, Marina. It's amazing."

I didn't know what to sayâ€"I had no idea what my own aura looked like. "Okay," I said, "My turn." Following Tommy's directions, I stared at Bella until a soft turquoise light surrounding her petite frame appeared. "I can see yours!" I could hide the excitement in my voice. It was pretty cool. "Bella, yours is beautiful."

"Thanks," she smiled, "I think it's your turn, Jet." He raised his eyebrows.

Rolling my eyes, I said, "Just try it. It could come in handy." He did, and actually managed to find it on me quickly (not that I'm really surprised). After that, the three of us took turns practicing seeing auras, until Tommy thought we would be able to pick someone out in a crowd. None of us were exactly willing to test his theory thoughâ€"afraid that the siren or those she was controlling would attack us. By the time we were finished, it was past four o'clock. This I only knew because my cell phone started to ring. It was my mom. I put the phone to my ear and said, "Hello?"

The tone at the other end was not a pleasant one, but it entirely my mother's. "Come home, now. You are in big trouble, young lady." Even though I was getting yelled at, I breathed a sigh of reliefâ€"my mom wasn't being controlled by the siren. Butâ€|she was obviously really mad at me for something.

"Okay," I told her, "I'm at Bella's house now, so I'll be home in ten minutes." My mom didn't answer. She just hung up the phone. I turned to my friends. "I have to go home. My mom's mad at me, and yes, it was really her."

The look on Jet's face told me he didn't careâ€"he was still worried. Sure enough, the next words out of his mouth were, "Maybe, but I'd feel better if I came with you, Mar."

"It's probably best that we stay in pairs anyway," Tommy said, "We'll have a better chance of defending ourselves in case of an attack."

"Okay, so Jet will go home with Marina, and Tommy, you can stay here in the guest bedroom," Bella said.

"Alright, let's go." Jet placed a hand against the small of my back and gently pushed me towards the door.

"Wait, before you leave," Tommy piped up, "we all agree that we aren't going to school again tomorrow, right?"

Bella, Jet and I all answered at the same time.

"Of course not."

"It's too dangerous."

"No way. We'll meet again tomorrow."

"Okay, okay," Tommy said holding up his hands, "I was just checking."

Jet led me down the stairs and then had me follow him to my Jeep, which he insisted on driving. I didn't know why, but, then again, I didn't really care. During the ride home, I watched the sunbeams dance around Jet's colorful aura. It really was amazing.

### 23. Hot Water

When I walked through the door, my mom yelled a lot. Okay, so she didn't yell at first. First, through gritted teeth, she said, "I'm sorry, John, but you'll have to go home tonight. Marina is grounded."

Grounded. Yup, apparently at sixteen years old my mom still felt the need to ground me, in front of my boyfriend no less. The look Jet gave me on his way out sent a clear message—he wasn't going anywhere, no matter what my mom said. I knew that once I was able to escape to the privacy of my own room I would be opening my window so Jet could climb through.

It was once Jet walked back through the door that the yelling started.

"You skipped school?" My mom screamed, "You skipped school! What were you thinking, Marina? You know how I feel about your education! I would have expected something like this from Cole, but not from you! Did you think you would get away with it? Did you know that the high school called me in the middle of a meeting today to ask me where you were? How do you think I felt when I couldn't give them an answer? Why would you even do such a thing?"

My mom had spat so many questions at me at once I didn't know which one to answer, or if I should even answer any of them. Should I tell her about the siren? About all the people who are possessed? I looked up at her. She was waiting for me to answer at least one of her questions. No, I realized, I couldn't tell her. She would panic if she knew. She would want to take the family and get away from here, probably leave California. And we couldn't do that. Not when so many people weren't in control of their lives.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I just wanted a break. I thought it would be fun." It was quite possibly the worst lie I had ever come up with,

but I didn't care. If she knew the true reason I had skipped school she wouldn't be yelling at me to begin with. In fact, we'd probably be having a very different conversation.

My mom sighed. "Marina, I understand that sometimes things can get a bit overwhelming, but next time you feel that way just come to me before you decide to skip school or something? Okay?"

I nodded. "Okay."

"Now set the table and then go upstairs. I'll call you down for dinner in a bit," she said. I did as she instructed and then climbed the stairs to my bedroom. I closed the door behind me and ran to open my window. Two seconds later, Jet was coming through it.

"What was your mom so angry about?" he asked.

"You didn't hear her?"

"I could hear yelling but I couldn't make out what she was saying."

"She found out we skipped school," I said.

"Did you tell her why?"

"No," I sighed, "If I did she probably would have wanted to run."

"I can't blame her."

I raised my eyebrows in his direction, asking for further explanation.

"This siren is really dangerous, Mar. She's already killed one person and has hundreds more under her control. And we don't even know how to stop her," he said as he sat down on my bed.

"But we're the only ones who even know what is going on, so we're the only ones who can do something about it," I explained.

"I know," he sighed, "things would be a lot easier if we could just run away."

"With great power comes great responsibility," I said.

Jet laughed. "Really?" he said, "You're quoting Spiderman now?"

I shrugged. "What? It seemed appropriate." He laughed again.

An hour later I found myself seated at the dining room table with the rest of my family while Jet hid out in my room. I kept my eyes on the plate in front of me, waiting for the moment when the general conversation turned to the one where my mom told my dad about how I skipped school. I knew he would be just as mad as my mom was when she found out.

"Marina didn't go to school today," my mom said casually. Just like that. She put it right out there. Still not looking up from my plate of food, I waited for my father's outburst, but it didn't come.

"Mark, did you hear me? I said Marina skipped school today," my mom

said again.

"That's not good," my dad said in a monotone voice that I have never heard him use before. Both my mom and I were incredulous. It was then that I looked up for the first time. And saw his eyes. They flashed white. My dad was under the siren's control. How had I not noticed this before? I scanned the eyes of the rest of my family at the table. I already knew my mom was fine, but what about Cole and Skye? I stared at the two of them. Neither of them had said a word since we sat down, which made me even more suspicious. Sure enough, within the next few seconds I saw their eyes flash milky white. My whole family, with the exception of my mom (I guess she just got lucky) and myself, was under the siren's control. What was I going to do?

I ate my dinner as fast as I could and asked if I could be excused. My mom, who was still surprised by my dad's lack of reaction to me skipping school, allowed me to leave. Sneaking into the kitchen, I grabbed two apples and four granola bars for Jet to eat. I ran up the stairs and threw the door open, startling Jet, who was casually lying on my bed reading a book.

"Are you okay?" he asked, closing the book and sitting up. I tossed him the food I had stolen. "Thanks. So, what's wrong?"

"My dad, Cole and Skye are all under the siren's control," I told him, pacing back and forth across the room.

"Are you sure?"

"I saw their eyes, Jet."

He grabbed my hand and pulled me towards him. "It'll be okay." My body seemed to instantly relax at his touch. I sank down on the bed next to him.

"But it's my family, Jet."

"I know, and it's probably my family too. Which is why we have to figure out a way to fix this. But we won't be able to unless we take a break once in awhile and get a good night's sleep," he said as he put his arm around my shoulders.

"You do realize it's like seven o'clock, right?"

"I didn't say to get started on that good night's sleep now." He rolled his eyes and chuckled a bit.

"Oh?" I pursed my lips and raised my eyebrows at him, "Well, what did you have in mind for now?"

"Hmm," he said slyly as he leaned in closer to me, "Maybe a little of this?" He gave me a short, but sweet, kiss on the lips then pulled away.

I smiled. "Or maybe a lot of that?" I leaned in and kissed him but didn't pull away this time, and neither did he. He kissed me back, both of us hungry for more. His hand slid around my waist as I snaked mine up to his broad shoulders. When we broke apart we were both breathing heavily.

"How about we watch a movie to get our mind off things?" Jet suggested.

There were some other things that I would much rather have been doing but I didn't tell him this. Instead I just said, "Okay." So he popped a DVD in my laptop and we laid down on my bed to watch it. It's really no wonder that I fell asleep while watching itâ€"I was exhausted.

I was jolted awake around midnight by the sound of the backdoor slamming shut. Confused, and slightly dazed, I swung my legs over to the side of my bed and stood up, being careful not to disturb Jetâ€"who was passed out beside me. I walked over to the window that I had left open and looked down at the moonlit backyard just in time to see a tall figure dart inside the cover of the trees. What was Cole doing? Where was he going at this time of night? Images of the woman who had been hit by the truck flashed through my mind. I couldn't let that happen to Cole. Being as loud as I dared, I slid my feet into a pair of sneakers, headed downstairs and out the backdoor following in Cole's wake. I kept my distance from him as we walked through the woodsâ€"a place that was very different at nightâ€"especially when I wasn't using my wolf eyes.

All of a sudden I lost Cole. One minute he was about 20 feet in front of me and the next he disappeared. I stepped into a clearing of the forest and looked around, but he wasn't there. I panicked. Where did he go?

"Cole?" I whispered to the trees. No answer. "Cole?" I said again, a bit louder this time.

There was a crunching of leaves to my left and a soft voiceâ€"that definitely wasn't Cole'sâ€"called, "Hello?" I tensed. From the trees emerged a young woman. She had long blonde hair that was so light it looked almost white in the moonlight. I relaxed when I saw the look on the woman's faceâ€"she was afraid, and her eyes weren't whiteâ€"and besides, even if she wasn't it wasn't like I was completely defenseless.

"Are you lost?" I asked the woman.

She nodded. "I was hiking, and I wandered from the trail, which I guess wasn't the smartest thing to do, since now I'm lost."

I wasn't surprised. I had happened upon more than my fair share of lost hikers. "Well, you're not as far as you think," I smiled at her, "there's a road about half a mile that way." I pointed to my right.

"Oh, thank goodness," the woman said but she didn't move. She just stood there and stared at me. When a sly smile crept onto her face I began to get worried. Common sense seemed to flood back into me. Who would go hiking at this time of night? The nearest hiking trail was a good five miles away. I looked down at her feet. She was barefoot.

I was about to run, to shift, to pick up the broken tree branch in front of me and swing it at her, but before I could do any of those things my arms were yanked behind my back. Cole had come up behind me and had grabbed hold of my wrists so I couldn't break away. "Cole!" I

cried, "What are you doing?" But then I rememberedâ€"Cole was under the siren's controlâ€"a siren who, I was sure, was standing right in front of me. I struggled against my older brother's grip but it was like fighting iron handcuffs.

"Marina, is it?" the siren cooed. I didn't answer her. "You don't have to say anything. I already know everything about you. Your little family secret? Your father and siblings were all too willing to share." She looked me up and down. "And then I got to thinking, why not have the whole family? I could definitely use a wolf in my pack. I was going to get you at school but you ran off. At first I wondered if you were smarter than I gave you credit for, but I guess I was wrong since you followed your brother out here."

"I didn't want you to kill him like you did that woman a couple weeks ago," I spat.

"I killed a woman?" the siren asked, looking genuinely confused, "No, notâ€|recently." She smiled that devious smile again. "But you might."

I glared at her. "Never."

"Oh I think you'll find that you won't have a say in the matter," she said and then she began to sing. There were no words to her song but the tune reminded me of the rolling ocean waves. The siren came closer and closer to me as she sang. She got so close that for a second I was afraid she was going to kiss me. But she didn't. Instead, she placed both her hands, which had turned to water, against my ears. The next thing I felt was warm water seeping into my ear canals. For a second I felt like my eardrums were going to pop, as if I had stayed down at the bottom of the deep end in my grandparents' pool for too long. But then the tension eased. The siren took her hands away and stepped back. Cole was no longer holding me. I could run. I told myself to run but my feet didn't move. I commanded my feet to move over and over again to no avail. I could no long control my movements.

The siren was in control now.

#### 24. Under Control

My body woke me up the next morning like any other normal school day. And for a second I thought it was. For one blissful second I thought that the whole thing with the siren was some crazy dream, or nightmare, rather. That second was ruined when I realized that while my brain was thinking this, my body was moving on its own accord. It was getting me ready for schoolâ€"picking out a cute top to go with my jean shorts, and pulling my hair up in a high ponytailâ€"even though I had promised Jet, Tommy and Bella that I wouldn't go to school today. Jet.

When my body turned towards my bed I saw that Jet was still lying there: asleep. I knew I wouldn't be able to command my body to go over to him, so instead I begged it to make more noise, hoping it would wake him up. But it was a pointless effort. The way my body moved while under the siren's control was so smooth and so silent, it disturbed me. It was as if my body could predict what movements would make noise and it purposely avoided those. By the time my hand

grabbed hold of my school bag, I was screaming insideâ€"screaming at Jet to wake up, screaming at my body to listen to meâ€"but nothing happened. My feet walked out the door without another glance at the boy lying dead on my bed.

The entire rideâ€"I say ride because it was my body driving, not meâ€"to school I was cursing my stupidity the night before and Jet, for not being a lighter sleeper. The parking lot at school was full of students. If anyone came to see about a claim that the students were all in trouble or all sick they would think it a hoax. But I knew differently. And now that I was one of those students I also knew how it feltâ€"awful. To be stuck inside a body with no control over it was quite possibly the worst kind of prison to ever exist. The fact that it was my own body I had lost control of made the situation even worse. I studied the students that my eyes let me see. Almost no one was talking. I'd like to think that I would have been able to realize something was wrong just by the lack of teenage chatter, but I hadn't picked up on it yesterdayâ€"Bella was the one who came running to me about it. There were a few students who were talking. I counted ten of them as my eyes scoped them out.

"That's your job for today." The siren's voice popped inside my head as if she was standing right next to meâ€"which, she wasn'tâ€"I could see using my peripheral vision. First she could control me and now she could talk to me too? This was beyond weird, not to mention confusing.

"\_Huh? What?" I thought intelligently.

"Your job today is to round up all the students and teachers that are not in my control so that I can get them under my control," the siren said telepathically. Again, I wished I had my own powers of telepathy. They would have come in handy last night when I thought Cole was going out to kill himself and not to draw me into a trap, or even this morning when I wanted to wake up Jet.

"\_Not gonna happen," I told her fervently.

"Marina, when are you going to realize that you can't resist me?" She sounded like she was sighing. "You belong to me now, so you better get used to it."

"\_I may not be in control but I am \_still \_here. And there is nothing you can do about \_that\_,"\_ I shot at her, kind of smugâ€"I didn't think she would like that very much.

"Actually, I think there is something I can do about that," she said. Then, somehowâ€"even though the thought wasn't my ownâ€"an image appeared in my mind. It showed me, in my wolf form, teeth barred, herding a bunch of students into a cornerâ€"there is nothing but pure fear in each of their eyes. Then the image changes and I am standing in something thick and wet. The liquid seeps through the pads of my paws, creating a sticky sensation where it has dried in between my toes. It is the same liquid that is dripping from my lips. The coppery taste lets me know that it is bloodâ€"the blood of all the dead students who lie in front of me.

Had the siren not been in control of my body I would have collapsed on the asphalt from the horror of what she had shown me. She didn't have to say anything. I knew that that was the remaining students'

fate if I were to continue my resistance. I had been wrong. There was something that siren could do to make me want to be compliantâ€"she could make me kill.

I had no choice but to do what she said, without a complaint. I was convinced that being controlled by a siren was better than being dead. I never wanted to kill anyone or anything. The siren knew that doing so would break me inside.

"That's right," she cooed in my head. "Do as I say and no one will get hurt." Why is it that bad guys always say that?

As my feet moved toward the school building, I could only hope that Jet, Bella and Tommy figured out a way to get everyone, me included, back to normal.

First period was a drag. I had history, and, Mr. Grady didn't even ask me where I had been the day before. Not that I was really surprised about that, given the fact that he was one of the teachers who was already possessed by the siren. History, without Bella there to keep me company, was as boring as ever. Not that I could have said anything to her, but if she were here maybe she would have been able to stop me from what I knew I had to do later that dayâ€"which was ruin the lives of the few free students. When the bell rang everyone filed out of the classroom. No one bumped shoulders or linked arms or started a conversation with their friendâ€"in fact, friends, who would have normally clung to each other, couldn't seem to stand being in the same room. It was the strangest thing I had ever experienced and was probably unheard of in any other high school.

Second period was just as bad as first, maybe even worse. The only thing that made it slightly interesting was when the siren contacted me again. She told me that it would be during third period that I would get to round up the remaining "free" students and teachers while the rest of the school attended an assembly she had set up.

"\_Oh, joy,"\_ I thought, the sarcasm heavy in my tone. But the siren didn't seem to notice. She was probably just happy I wasn't trying to resist her.

Less than two minutes after the bell rang to end second period the hallways were practically deserted. Everyone had gone to the auditorium for the siren's so-called assembly. The only students (and teachers) who remained in the hallway were the ones that the siren had no control overâ€"the ones I was supposed to round up for her. I counted the people before me. There were about fifteen all together. All I had to do was get them into one classroom and make sure they didn't get out. It was simple, easy really. There was no reason for there to be any bloodshed.

"Marina!" My name echoed off the walls of the hall. The few people who were still in the hall looked up at the noise but then went back to whatever they were doingâ€"whoever had said my name it came as no surprise to them. It should have been no surprise to me too. Because I knew exactly who that voice belonged to. I even knew the exact shape his lips had made in order to call my name.

Jet. He had found me.

My body turned around. On the inside, I sighed with relief when I saw that it wasn't just Jet, but Bella and Tommy were with him too. My body didn't react the same way. Instead, it tensed, as if preparing to fight. No! She couldn't make me fight my friends. As if to show me should could, my knees bent into an athletic stance. But even that almost broke when I saw the look on Jet's face. By now he had most certainly seen my eyes flash that milky white, and he knew. He knew that it wasn't me he was facing. I wanted to scream, to shout, to do anything to let him know that I was still there. But I couldn't. All I could do was watch and wait.

Then the siren was in my head again. "Do it!" she urged, "Get them!"

"No!" I shouted back at her, "They're my friends!"

"I don't care!" she snarled, "I told you what would happen if you tried to disobey."

The next thing I knew I had dropped to my knees and I felt the familiar tingling and pull of skin. She was forcing me to shiftâ€"in the middle of school, in front of my peers, peers who wouldn't forget what they saw.

"No!" This time the shout didn't come from my head, it came from Jet. He knew what was happening and he knew that he couldn't let it happen. He ran to me and dropped to the ground in front of me. "Fight it, Marina! You have to fight it!" The look in my eyes must have shown him that I couldn't, because then he was yelling at Tommy and Bella to get everyone out of the hall. They did as he instructedâ€"running about the hall, telling whatever lie they had to to get everyone to leave. No sooner did the last person dart inside a nearby bathroom did I hear the tearing of clothing and feel my body shift to form a wolf. From my mouth escaped a feral growl and the next thing I knew I had Jetâ€"still humanâ€"pinned beneath my razor sharp claws.

"Please don't hurt him! Please don't hurt him!" I begged, but the siren didn't respond to my plea.

"I'm sorry, Marina," Jet whispered. Sorry? What was he sorry for?

Then he closed his eyes and again I heard the tearing of clothingâ€"this time it was Jet's. He shifted into my black wolf and, swiping a large paw at my chest, got out from under me. My voice growled at him again and my legs lunged towards him. Thankfully, he deftly avoided me. He swung around behind me and, before my body could turn to face him again, he clasped his jaw around my neck, sinking his teeth into my skin. I couldn't even cry out in pain, but, boy oh boy, did it hurt. Now I knew why he was sorry. Instead, my body simply tried to shake him off. But Jet didn't let go, he just held me tighter. After about a minute, I noticed that my vision was getting blurry. My head felt like it was swimming. That was when I realized what Jet was doing.

The siren couldn't control me if I was unconscious. I let my mind drift, knowing that my body would have to follow.

"Take that," I thought as the world around me faded into

darkness.

## 25. Bella's Power

When I woke I didn't know where I was. But I wasn't clueless. Oh no. I did know that I was lying on a very itchy couch. I did know that my neck still hurt beyond what I would have liked to admit. And I did know that I was still under the siren's control. All of these things not being very pleasant things to know, but when your four legs are tied together with what was most likely an entire role of duck tapeâ€"something that would take me at least three hours to gnaw through (had my snout not been restrained with a muzzle)â€"you have to focus on the least worst part of the situation (which, if I have to pick, would be the itchy couch).

"She's awake," a familiar voice woke me from my thoughts. My eyes searched for the body the voice was attached toâ€"just as curious to find out who had kidnapped me.

The voice belonged to Bella, but she wasn't alone. Tommy and Jet sat beside her. The three of them were huddled close together on a couch opposite my ownâ€"a couch that I would like to point out looked infinitely more comfortable than the one I was on. They looked like they had been having a very strained conversation. I had only one guess what that conversation was aboutâ€"me. Jet was red in the face and Bella's lips were pursedâ€"they had been arguing. And from the exasperation on Tommy's face, I guessed that his mediation attempts were failing.

It did occur to me that I was lying on this itchy couch in someone's basement. Whose, I didn't know. I had never been in any of their basements. It really was no surprise that even though Jet and I have been good friends for years we have spent most of our time together at my house, not his. It's not that I've never been to Jet's house, because I have. I have even been in his basement. But that was before his family renovated it and I discovered that Jet and I shared a certain shifty secret. So, even though I knew I was in a basement I still had no clue where I wasâ€"which, considering I was still under the control of the siren who seemed to have access to my thoughts, was probably a good thing.

"So what do we do now?" Tommy asked, not to anyone in particular. He seemed to just want to leave the question floating out in the air.

Jet slid off the opposite couch and crawled over to me so that his face was level with mine. There was a spark in his green eyes as he stared into mine. I was surprised, but didn't complain when my eyes held his gaze. But, almost as quickly as the spark appeared it vanished and he turned away from me. I was sure he had seen that fateful flash of white which I knew covered my irises as long as I was still in control of the siren.

"We need to get Marina back," Jet said to Tommy and Bella.

I wanted to scream at him that I was right here, but I knew it wouldn't matter if I did. He knew I wasn't in control. Just then, something inside me stirred. I felt the familiar pull of skin and my fur began to recede. Apparently the siren didn't need me in my wolf

form anymore. I was sure that Jet realized what was happening at the same time I did, maybe even before, because as soon as I was settled in my human skin again Jet had wrapped me in a warm blanket. Since I was unable to hold it against my bare skin (just because I shifted back didn't mean the duck tape unstuck itself from my arms and legs), Jet sat next to me, placing his arms around me but not looking at me.

"And how do you expect us to do that?" Bella asked Jet as soon as he was settled in next to me.

"John, we don't know who the siren is. We don't know how to stop her. And we definitely don't know a way to return possessed people to normal, other than a spell that is way out of my league. Face it man, we have nothing," Tommy said.

No, you don't. You know how she controls people, I thought.

"No, we don't. We know how the siren controls people," Jet said. And that is why we are perfect for each other!

"Okay, so we know that she sings a song and water passes from brain to brain. But what can we do with that information? Create more zombies for her?" Bella asked, a hint of sarcasm in her voice.

Jet frowned. He stared down at my tied hands for awhile. No one said anything and I was thankful the siren had my eyes moving where I wanted them too. Then, all of a sudden, he looked up at me. This time, when he stared at me the spark in his eyes didn't disappear, in fact, it seemed to glow stronger the longer he stared at me. For the first time since the siren took me, I felt completely alone in my own head—but why would she choose to hang back now, when her greatest threats were plotting to stop her? My eyes stayed focused on Jet's, not wavering from his welcoming green. But, as quickly as he looked at me he looked away just as quickly, if not quicker. It was Bella who took his attention away from me, and he was looking at her like he had never seen her before—which, I admit, unnerved me a bit.

"We can't," he said, still staring at Bella, "but maybe you can."

"What are you talking about?" Bella asked. Yeah, what was he talking about? And why was he still staring at her like she was a godsend? Okay, I admit it, I was more than a bit unnerved inside.

"Bella," Jet said, rather excited, "you have this unique power over water, right?"

"Yeah—" Bella said, clearly uncertain. She had as much of an idea where Jet was going with this brainstorm as the rest of us.

"And, according to Tommy's book, what is allowing the siren to control everyone is the water that she put inside their heads," Jet said, standing up. He began pacing in front of my itchy couch. "What if you could turn this water from the siren inside Marina's head into that temporary jelly substance and then render it powerless? Marina would no longer be under the siren's control!"

"There's a possibility it could work," Tommy said, considering the

idea. Bella didn't look so sure.

"I don't know, Jet," she said, "I've never used my power on water I can't actually see."

"So you practice," Jet shrugged, "Here. Now."

Tommy shook his head. "It's still a huge risk. Bella could turn liquid that isn't from the siren into jelly and cause some serious damage in Marina's brain."

"Besides, we don't even know if it would work. I could do it, but then Marina might still be under the siren's control," Bella said.

"It's worth a try," Jet said.

Bella shook her head. "Tommy's right, Jet. It's too big of a risk. I could hurt Marina."

"We couldn't do something this risky to her, especially not knowing if Marina wants us to do it or not," Tommy said.

I want to do it!

Jet sat down next to me. He looked at me, once again staring into my eyes. "She wants us to try it," he said confidently. Yes! Wait, was my telepathy finally starting to work?

"You don't know that," Bella said softly, placing a hand gently on his knee, but he shook her off.

"Yes, I do," he said boldly, "Marina and I are both shapeshifters. We are both wolf shapeshifters. We were close even before we knew that. We spend more time together than we do with our own families. No one knows her better than I do, because I get her, and she gets me because we were meant to be together." His voice trailed off towards the end, locking eyes with me again, and, I finally felt like he could see me behind the white haze.

Bella and Tommy exchanged a look.

Bella sighed. "Okay, but I need to practice first."

Tommy disappeared and returned with a bunch of different liquids and an opaque cup. He mixed a few other liquids with the water in the cup. Bella practiced until she was able to isolate the water and turn it without disturbing the other liquids. And then she practiced until she could do it without looking.

"Ready?" Jet asked Bella. She nodded. Jet reached down and cut the tape off my arms and legs, pulling me to my feet beside him. Bella stood in front of me. She took a deep breath in.

"Either you save her or you kill her, but I'm still going to win in the end." The words had come out of my mouth but they weren't my own. They belonged to the siren. Bella froze and Jet's grip on me tightened, but the siren didn't move my body. "You all will be mine," she hissed through my lips. Bella stumbled back, clearly afraid and Tommy caught her before she fell.

"Bella," Jet said, urgently, leaning forward slightly but not letting go of me, "don't listen to her. You can do this."

Standing on her own again, Bella nodded. She took a couple steps towards me. She held her hand up to my head and closed her eyes. I knew she was searching for the water tendril from the siren. All of a sudden she tensed. She had found it. Her eyes flew open and her hand flipped 180 degrees. And then my head collapsed inside itself.

## 26. Can't and Can

Something was falling. No, I was falling. My arms flailed at my sides, desperately searching for something to cling to. But there was nothing there. I opened my mouth to scream, but no sound came out. The air rushed from my lungs and, for some reason, I couldn't take anymore in. This was it. After all my fighting, after all we had discovered, the siren was still going to win. I was going to die.

Suddenly, a pair of warm arms wrapped around me and I was being pulled forwardâ€"away from the open air, away from the fatal drop.

"Open your eyes," a voice like falling petals whispered in my ear, forcing air back into my empty lungs. I did as it instructed. The first thing I saw was a colorâ€"greenâ€"green like a mix between the forest moss and waters of the ocean with fairy dust sprinkled on top. It took me a minute to realize this green with gold flecks was actually the color of something, or someone's eyes ratherâ€"Jet's eyes. In his eyes, I saw everything I loved about the worldâ€"the forests, the wildlife, the oceans, the magicâ€|him. I wondered how anyone could look into those eyes and not know there was something magical about the person they belonged to.

I expanded my vision, immediately identifying the multicolored aura that danced around his frame. Beyond it, I saw similar red and turquoise ones surrounding Tommy and Bella. The room was a lit with beautiful color.

The room. I was in a room. I hadn't been falling. I couldn't have. It only felt like I was. The air I sucked into my starving lungs felt cool but the inside of my ears felt warm. It was a pleasant sensation, one that filled me with relief even if I didn't know why. It reminded me of when I had gotten water suck in my ear after swimming in my grandparents' pool. My mom had to put a vinegar and alcohol solution in my ear to help get the chlorinated water out. The water had been hot when it finally slithered out of my ear canal.

My ears were wet now. Water was dripping out of them. I hadn't gone swimming but water was coming out of my head. My eyes flew down to my hands. They were balled into tight fists. Very slowly and very deliberately, I opened them. I listened for any sign of the siren in my head. Nothing. She was gone. The connection had been severed. I was in control again.

Smiling, I looked back up to Jet. Before he even had time to register the smile on my face, I had thrown my arms around him, pulling him closer, and pressed my lips to his. He stiffened, surprised by my

fierceness, but then he softened, accepting the kiss as his lips and body molded to mine.

"Well, I guess that means it worked." Jet and I broke apart at the sound of Tommy's voice. I had forgotten we weren't alone. I had also forgotten that I only had a blanket wrapped around me. Oops. I looked over to my two friends, pulling the blanket tighter. Tommy simply looked amused but Bella had her eyebrows raised, looking like she wanted to burst out laughing.

I smiled at the two of them. "You could say that."

"Awesome," Tommy said, "I'll go find Connor."

I stopped smiling.

"No!" Both Bella and I said at the same time.

Tommy frowned at us. "Why not?"

I looked to Bella. I didn't really have a good answer for Tommy. I just knew that what he was suggesting wasn't a good idea. I hoped Bella could explain it better.

"There are hundreds, maybe even thousands of people, out there who are possessed by the siren," she said, "not only could they hurt us but there is no way I can do what I just did for Marina for every single one of them."

"Bella, I get that, trust me. You don't have to talk to me about how much energy it takes to use power like that. I've worn myself out trying to perform different spells tons of times," Tommy explained, "But you won't have to do it on everyone, just on Connor for now. And we'll figure out something else for everyone after." He reached for the set of car keys that were sitting on a table against the wall, but Jet stepped forward and grabbed them before Tommy could. "Hey! John, give me my keys."

"Sorry, but I can't do that," Jet said.

"And why the hell not?" Tommy asked, his mouth straightening to form a flat line across his face.

"If we fix Connor where is he going to go?" Jet said, "he can't go back out there."

"No," Tommy agreed, "so he'll have to stay here with us."

"Stay with us? While we try to come up with a plan to stop a siren?" Jet asked incredulously, but his question didn't seem to faze Tommy so he rephrased it, "While two shapeshifters, a sorcerer, and a mermaid try to come up with a plan to stop a siren? You don't think he might have a lot of questions?"

Tommy's face fell. "Oh. Yeah," he said, "so then what do we do?"

"We still need to identify the siren," Jet said.

"I don't think we can go out there searching everyone for an aura anymore," Bella pointed out.

Jet nodded. "Especially since Marina still got attacked by the siren."

"But it's our only way of distinguishing the siren from everyone else," Tommy said.

"No," I muttered, not expecting anyone to hear me, but they did.

"I'm sorry?" Jet said.

My thoughts had drifted back to the night before when I had followed Cole into the woods. Had that really only been last night? It felt like that had happened days ago. I guessed it was a side effect of being possessed by the siren for however many hours. I sifted through my memories, feeling like I was pulling a thread taut, as they resisted me. It was like the siren didn't want me to remember my encounter with her. And she had every reason not to. But I pulled harder and then it was as if the thread snapped and the memories were able to flood back into my mind. I could feel my face light up when I found the memory I was looking for. My excitement didn't dissipate, even as I looked around at the confused and downtrodden faces of my friends. "I was attacked," I exclaimed.

"We know," Jet said, a hint of sadness in his voice, "and I'm so sorry, Marina. I should have been there. I should have protected you."

I gently laid my hand on top of his. "You did protect me," I said, "you made sure my secret stayed a secret, you got me out of the school and away from everyone who was possessed, and you even figured out a way to return me to normal." I smiled at him. "I think it's safe to say you performed more than your expected boyfriend duties for the day."

He laughed. "I have expected duties?"

"Of course," I said, pretending to be shocked that he didn't already know this.

"Okay, lovebirds, time to focus," Bella laughed, "Marina, you were attacked?"

"Yes, I was attacked by the siren. I saw her in her human form. I know who she is!"

Bella, Tommy and Jet looked at me like I had just given them the best news in the world.

I grinned back at each of them, before adding, "And I think I know a way to stop her." I quickly explained my idea, all of them agreeing that it could work. After that we settled in on the floor with pencil and paper and began drawing up our plans. We spent hours arguing, drawing, and redrawing until we were confident our plan would work.

Then we spent another hour making sure we had every single detail of it memorized.

"I think we should call it a night," Jet said.

Tommy nodded. "You guys can all stay here." Ohhh, so we were in Tommy's basement.

"After what happened last night," Jet eyed me, "I think that's a good idea."

I texted my mom to tell her I was staying at a friend's place. I didn't tell her where in case the siren had gotten to her, but I still wanted to let her know I was okay. And I didn't want to get grounded again. Tommy laid out four sleeping bags and four pillows, one for each of us.

"Umm, Tommy?" I asked.

"Yeah?"

"You don't happen to have an extra pair of shorts and a t-shirt I could borrow, do you?" I grimaced, embarrassed that I was asking my guy-friend to get me something to wear.

"Oh, wow. Sorry, Mar," Jet said, "here." He handed me his drawstring bag. "All I've got are my clothes since I didn't want to stop at your house."

"That's fine, thanks Jet," I said and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek before grabbing the bag and darting around the corner where no one could see me to change.

When I came back, everyone had already climbed in their sleeping bags. I picked up the sheets of paper that lay out our plan, looking it over one last time before climbing in the sleeping bag between Jet and Bella. I really, really hoped our plan worked. If it didn't, we might all become the siren's victims.

## 27. Watchwolf

I shifted my position in the dirt, tucking my knees under for about the fifth time. When I volunteered myself for a stakeout I didn't realize I would be sitting in the mulch behind a bush, next to the world's never-ending spider web, for two hours. I was beginning to think that this wasn't the best plan we had come up with.

I did learn one thing over the last two hours though—"whether I sat on my knees or on my butt" stakeouts sucked. In movies and TV shows they make them seem all devious and cool, but trust me, they're not. As a matter of fact, on a "fun meter" I think stakeouts would rate about as high as studying for finals. Literally, all you do is sit there and watch people—"people who are usually having more fun than you. Sure, people watching can be funny, but it only provides you with limited entertainment, especially when all the people you are watching are being controlled by a mythical creature. You can only watch people comment on flowery store displays for so long before you can predict what they are going to say.

I was supposed to be watching for two things. One, anyone who might not be under the siren's control and, two, someone who seemed to be the siren's second in command. Yesterday, we deduced that with the

vast number of people the siren was controlling there had to be a few that she used to do her dirty work, like she had used Cole to lure me and how she wanted to use me to round up my still impressionable classmates. But, after two hours of watching Main Street from behind a bush next to the post office, no one had done anything out of the ordinary. In fact, everything everyone did was dreadfully boring. I guessed the siren wanted to draw as little suspicion to any outsiders who might be passing by, or those who were still themselves, as possible, either that or bore me to death since the use of Bella's power on me had failed to make me a member of the dead.

I don't know why I expected anything different. Finding someone who wasn't under control or someone who was in charge or even the siren herself in the twenty minutes I expected to be sitting out here would have been too easy. And why would I ever want it to be easy? I mean, I really enjoyed sitting in the dirt for two hours, feeling like spiders were crawling up my legs every ten seconds. It was such a pleasant sensationâ€¦not.

The phone in my jeans pocket buzzed. I pulled it out and read the text message from Jet. He wanted to know if I had seen anything yet. I texted him back no and then put the phone back in my pocket. I sighed as I looked back out at the people walking by. I should have known by now that things never went the way I wanted them to.

While I was stuck in this bush, he, Bella and Tommy were prepping for our attack against the sirenâ€"plotting routes, practicing spellsâ€"well, Tommy was anyway. Again, I found myself wishing I had volunteered to be his guinea pig instead. That would have at least been interesting.

I scanned the street again. Nothing.

Again. Nothing.

And again. Nothing.

No, wait. My head snapped to my left. There, crossing the street, was Cole. And behind himâ€¦

"But Cole, where are we going?" My mom's voice floated to my ears, filling my insides with a mixture of warmth and dread. It was still her. She wasn't under the siren's control. But I had a feeling that wasn't going to last much longer. Which that the siren was here somewhere. But how had I missed her? She couldn't have gone by without me seeing her. Unless she had used a back door of some sorts.

"I want to show you something," Cole told our mom in the same monotone voice my father had used the other night.

"Sweetie, you already said that," my mom said. I could tell she was finally getting suspicious, but there was nothing I could do to help her now. If Cole was taking her to the siren as I suspected then any attempt to rescue her would only put me in harm's way. And I knew Tommy, Jet and Bella wouldn't appreciate having to save meâ€¦again.

"It's in here," Cole said gesturing to one of shops nearby.

"The bookstore?" My mom asked, "Cole, you hate to read."

Cole didn't answer her or provide an explanation he simply held the door open for her to walk inside. She did and he followed behind her. I knew the siren was in there. I had to get a closer look without them noticing me. The purpose of this whole stakeout was to keep watch for people who were in charge or weren't under the siren's control. And, it seemed to me that Cole and my mom fit both of those descriptions, so I had to stay close.

I crawled along the wall of the post office, behind the bushes. There had to be a back or side door that the siren used to get in, and I could use too. Sure enough there was a door behind the bookstore that they must use for deliveries. I opened the door as quietly as I could and snuck inside. Crouching behind boxes of unpacked books, I took in the scene before me. The siren stood in the middle of the room, her shimmery blonde hair tied back in a ponytail. It was strange to see her wearing a ponytail—well it was really just strange to see her in such a normal setting. It made her look—seem—normal. It made it hard to remember that she wasn't. When I met her in the woods the other night, it had been clear that there was something supernatural about her—the way the moonlight reflected off her silvery-blond hair, and the fact that she hadn't been wearing any shoes. But she was wearing shoes this time, Nikes in fact, and in the bookstore's dim lighting her hair looked more like a straw blonde color than a silver one.

But there was one thing that wasn't normal about the siren, and that was the people surrounding her. There were several others, besides the siren, Cole and my mom, in the bookstore. All of the other people were under the siren's control and she had had them form a wide circle around her. The bookstore looked like it had become the headquarters of a cult. I counted ten people surrounding the siren. I recognized my dad, Skye, and Tommy's mom, along with a few others whose faces I knew but names I couldn't remember, amongst the people in the circle. It occurred to me that these people might be all the supernaturals in town, excluding the four of us of course. The siren clearly didn't know that my mom was completely human.

"What is this?" my mom asked, "What's going on?"

"Thank you, Cole," the siren said, her voice chilling my insides. Cole stepped back into a place amongst the rest of the people in the circle.

"Who are you?" my mom asked the siren.

The siren smiled at her. "My name is Shira, and, I need you to do something for me."

"What's that?"

"Come closer," Shira said, her voice like slithering snakes. Then she began to sing. I immediately recognized it as the same tune she sang to me the night she forced me under her control. Frozen in fear, I watched as the siren lifted her already liquid hands to my mom's head, placing each one against my mom's ears. When Shira pulled her hands away my mom's eyes flashed that familiar milky white and I couldn't help but shudder. I placed a hand over my mouth to keep anyone from hearing my ragged breathing. My mom was under the siren's

control now too. The last of my family had been taken. Almost everyone I loved. They were counting on my now more than ever.

"I have a special task for all of you," Shira said, looking around at the group, "I need you to hunt down the young shapeshifters and their friends, and bring them to me. Do whatever you have to. I don't care if you bring them to me alive or dead, but I want them." She paused, thinking for a minute. "Except for the girl,"

\_Me\_? Why did she want me? I thought I have proved to be more trouble than she bargained for.

"the mermaid. Bring her to me \_alive\_."

Bella. The siren didn't want me, she wanted Bella. Well, that was just perfect.

## 28. All Glammed Up

"You sure you can do this?" I asked Tommy. I didn't want to undermine his confidence or anything, but he had been the one to admit he wasn't a very skilled sorcerer.

"For the last time, Marina, I'm sure," Tommy sighed, "I just did it a couple minutes before you got back."

"Okay," I nodded, though still a little worried, "You know, I just wouldn't want to get stuck as someone else if something goes wrong."

"Me neither," Jet and Bella said at the same time. They exchanged glances with each other before quickly looking away. It seemed like they were having a hard time being near each other. They were already standing on opposite sides of the room and avoiding any eye contact whatsoever.

I frowned—something had definitely happened while I was gone.  
"What's up with you two?"

Jet lifted his head to look at me. "Umm, let's just say we're happy to be our normal selves again," he said, refusing to provide any further explanation. Bella just nodded in agreement. Maybe I didn't want to be Tommy's guinea pig after all.

"Alright," Tommy said, beckoning us forward, "Bella, Marina, you two ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be, I guess," I said.

"At least I won't be changing genders this time," Bella muttered under her breath. Ooo. Yeah, I definitely didn't want to be Tommy's guinea pig. I can't imagine what it must have been like to see yourself as a boy.

"John, I need you to come stand behind me," Tommy said, "I don't want you to accidentally get caught in the crossfire or something."

Jet raised his hands as if surrendering and walked around to stand behind Tommy and as far away from Bella and I as possible. "You don't

have to tell me twice."

Was this spell really that bad? I leaned in towards Bella and whispered, "Does it hurt?"

"No," she said, "it just feels like your body is rearranging itself. It probably feels much the same way shifting does for you."

I nodded but didn't say anything. I wasn't going to tell Bella that I didn't feel anything when I shifted these days. I had done it so many times and so often now that it was second nature. Most of the time I didn't even have to think about itâ€"all I had to do was want to be in one of my other forms and I was.

Tommy raised his hands, holding one in front of Bella and the other in front of me. He kept his eyes open, focusing on the two of us in front of him. He started speaking in another languageâ€"which I presumed was Latin since he told me before that all spells were in Latin. He said a lot of words, but, from what I could tell he didn't repeat any.

Then, just as Bella said, I felt myself rearranging. It was really the only way to describe the sensation. It felt like I was staying put but the rest of me was moving around, trying to find the right place to settle in. She had been wrong thoughâ€"it felt nothing like shifting. When I could still feel the shift, it felt like my body was literally changing shapeâ€"which, of course, it wasâ€"not rearranging.

Finally, Tommy lowered his eyes and glanced between the two of us. "How do you feel?" he asked, clearly worried that something went wrong. His expression only made me more nervous.

"Well, I don't have the sudden urge to reproduce with myself," Bella said, looking down. There was something about her voice that sounded off, but also very familiar. "So I think we're good this time."

I raised my eyebrows but didn't say anything. I had a feeling I didn't want to know. That was when I realized that I couldn't raise my eyebrows as far as I could before. It was like my mind had one limit for how far I could raise them and my body had another one. That was because this body wasn't my ownâ€"it wasn't any of the bodies I was familiar with. It wasn't that it was uncomfortable, it was just slightly foreign. I looked down at the body before me, realizing I was a little closer to the ground than I was a minute ago.

"Here," Jet said, handing me a mirror.

I took it from him and looked at my reflection. Only it wasn't me who stared backâ€"it was Bella. "Tommy, this is amazing," I said as I studied Bella's features in the handheld mirror, "I look just like her."

"And I look just like you."

I looked up from the mirror to Bella, only find that it wasn't Bella standing in front of me, but me. Something in my mind clickedâ€"that was why her voice was wrong and yet familiar tooâ€"it was my voice. And that meant that I had Bella's voice. I stared at Bella as she

stared back at me. It was very weird to see myself standing there in front of me.

"I have to say, I feel a lot better knowing that it's a girl in my body this time," Bella said, still watching me.

"Yeah, in hindsight, it probably wasn't the best idea to practice this spell with people of different genders," Tommy mused, looking between the two of us.

Jet glared at Tommy. "Ya think?"

Oh gosh. I could only imagine what it must have been like for Jet and Bella. No wonder they couldn't look at each other. Well, now it seemed that Jet wasn't having a hard time looking at me—"which totally wasn't fair since he knew I wasn't really Bella.

Jet's eyes moved from me to Bella and then back again. "This is weird," he said, "I know that if I were to kiss the one who looks like you I would be cheating on you, but I feel like I would also be cheating on you if I were to kiss you as you are."

I frowned. I wanted him to kiss me, but right now he was seeing Bella. "How about we just keep to hugs for now then?" I asked, not really wanting to but also not wanting to put Jet in an awkward situation.

He nodded and hugged me tight against him. I hugged him back.

"Okay, so are we all set?" Tommy asked.

I broke away from Jet. "I think so. We just have to make sure we aren't seen until we get there."

"And you're sure that's where she'll be?" Bella as me asked.

"Definitely," Jet said.

The four of us snuck through the woods as quietly as we could, but it was impossible not to make any noise. Since we spent hours upon hours in these woods, Jet and I weren't as loud as Tommy and Bella. I cringed inwardly every time one of them stepped on a tree branch and the snap echoed across the trees. Although, I guess it didn't matter how much noise we made the closer we got.

We wanted to be found.

We walked for about another half a mile before I heard something ahead of us. I stopped short, causing Jet to run into me.

"What is it?" Tommy asked.

"Shh. Someone's coming," Jet whispered.

Jet was both right and wrong. Someone was coming, but it was more than one someone. Five people emerged from the trees, all of their eyes flashing white, and immediately converged on us. We fought only a little, pretending to be taken over. Within minutes, Shira's minions had each of our hands tied behind our backs and were leading

us towards the small canyon where Jet first saw the footprints and where we chased the siren in her water form.

The siren was standing by the stream that ran through the canyon when we approached. She turned towards us and her eyes immediately lit up with excitement. Smiling, she looked at Bella and said, "Marina, you've returned," then gazing around at the rest of us added, "and you brought your friends for me. How nice." She walked up to me and her eyes traveled up and down the length of my body. "And you must be the mermaid." She smiled gleefully. Then, addressing the people holding Tommy, Jet and Bella, she said, "Take the rest over," she gestured to the side of the canyon, and then looking at the person holding me added, "bring her here."

Shira turned and started walking back towards the stream. The man who tied my hands dragged me along behind her. She picked up a stone and threw it in the water. "By now, I'm sure it is no surprise to you that we are both Sea Supernaturals." She glanced up at me but I didn't answer her. "I've heard that if you were to use your powers on a supernatural of the same element, it is excruciatingly painful for the other person," her eyes sparkled again, "but don't worry, my little mermaid, I'm sure I can handle it." She smiled at me again, and then she began to sing.

To my right I heard the comforting sound of a scuffle. Out of the corner of my eye I saw that Jet had shifted into his wolf form, broken free, and was now working on freeing Bella. Any second nowâ€¦

The siren lifted her watery hands to my head.

"Bella!" I shouted as Shira placed her cool hands against my ears. Fear laced through me. I was going to be under her control again.

But then Shira stopped singing. She frowned. She pulled her hands away from my head. That frown quickly turned into a sneer as she looked at her hands. They were now a smooth and hard like glass. Enraged she clapped her hands together, her eyes shooting between me and Bella.

I smiled. Tommy's spell had worked. The siren didn't know who was who. Jet had gotten the real Bella free. Bella had used her power to harden Shira's hands. Shira couldn't take control of anyone else ever again.

Glaring down at me, she hissed, "You think you've won? Have you forgotten about the thousands of people I have under my control?" Her eyes moved behind me and I followed her gaze to the top edges of the canyon. People were emerging out of the surrounding trees. I easily picked out the group of ten people the siren had talked to in the bookstore along with about a dozen others. Every single person's eyes flashed white as they began to climb down towards us.

No.

It didn't work.

We were completely and utterly surrounded. Supernaturals and humans alike, all still controlled by Shira, were slowly closing in on us from, quite literally, everywhere. I had to hand it to Shira. She really knew how to choose "above all, end all" battle spots. Being at the bottom of the small canyon, we had no place to run or hide--we were deader than a turkey on Thanksgiving. Actually, a lobster in a boiling pot of water would probably be a better analogy for our situation. Tommy, Bella, Jet and I were the lobsters, while all of Shira's minions were the hot water rushing in on us. Thankfully there was no lid on our pot so escape was still an option. Not a very feasible one, but one all the same.

The only way we were going to get out of this alive was if we fought, and we had to fight hard given the number of people we would have to get through to escape. But we couldn't do that. Not against these people who were only attacking us because Shira was forcing them to. Not against our friends. Not against my family. They were being made to hurt us, but we couldn't hurt them. Nor did we want to. Nor did we want to die. That much I was sure of. So, all we had to do was fight about three dozen people without harming them. No big deal.

But I couldn't do anything if my hands were still tied behind my back. Thankfully, Shira had forgotten to instruct the person holding me before to grab me again, so, taking my chance, I ducked away from her and ran over to where Tommy, Bella and Jet were. Jet was already busy ripping Tommy's ties away and I turned so Bella could undo mine.

"What are we going to do?" she asked me as the rope fell away from my hands.

"For now?" I shrugged. "Stay alive." It was the best (and only) answer I could give her.

"I could try to isolate the siren's water in some of their brains and destroy it," she pursed her lips, looking up, "but there are so many of them. And I need to concentrate."

"Don't worry about fixing them right now, Bella," I said, "if you think you can do it and not get killed, then do it, but otherwise just focus on getting out of here alive."

She nodded.

"Incoming," Jet said.

I looked to my left. Sure enough, some people had already made it to the bottom of the canyon and were making their way towards us--my father and Cole at the front of the herd.

"Here too," Tommy said.

I turned around to see that more people had made it down and were walking towards Tommy and the rest of us. We were going to have to fight the enemy (who was comprised of mostly our friends and neighbors) from all sides. I put my back to my friends, as they did the same to me--all of us preparing to face the oncoming attack. I felt my body form sway as Tommy's glamour spell fell away and I was me again.

Jet took my hand in his, giving it a gentle squeeze. I looked up at him and smiled. He was so beautiful. I loved absolutely everything about him. We had to make it out of this. There was no ifs, ands or buts about it. What had to. Because, I couldn't lose him. He was rightâ€"we were meant to be together. So we were going to make it out of thisâ€"together.

"You ready?" he asked me, dazzling green eyes staring down into my soulâ€"a soul that I was sure matched his.

As long as he was by my side, I was ready for anything. And, at the moment, anything seemed to mean the impossible. "Yes," I answered truthfullyâ€"no internal Marina lie detector going off thereâ€"squeezing his hand back. He let go of my hand and together we shifted into our wolf forms, running forward to greet our attackers.

The first three people I met had no supernatural powers (from what I could tell). They lunged at me, but I easily dodged them just as more came charging towards me. I tried to dodge them too, but one person managed to grab hold of my leg. I immediately stopped running once I realized thisâ€"not wanting to drag the poor man through the dirt and scar his back. Unfortunately, that wasn't the smartest idea on my part because as soon as I stopped he grabbed my other leg, pulling me to the ground. I felt two more people pile on top of, pinning me down. I let out my most ferocious growl, trying to intimidate them, but the people on top of me didn't release their grips. I snapped my jaw in their directions but they didn't even flinchâ€"it was like the siren had gotten rid of all their self-preservation. They didn't care that they were fighting a wolf with razor sharp teeth and claws. I tucked my feet under my body, readying my muscles. I counted to three in my head and then, using all the force I could muster with three people on top of me, I pushed upwardâ€"scattering my captors across the floor. I ran away from them, searching for Jet, Tommy, and Bella.

I immediately spotted Jetâ€"he had taken to knocking his attackers down by ramming them behind the kneesâ€"a technique that seemed to be quite effective. Tommy was knocking back at least five at a time using some sort of spell that looked like it sent an invisible gust of wind at them. Despite the chaos, I couldn't help but smile to myself. No good at spells? Hmph. Tommy looked like he was a pretty darn good sorcerer to me. I turned and saw Bella, still in the middle of the canyon. A woman was on the ground a few feet away from her, staring out at the scene around her with nothing but fear and confusion. Bella's hand was raised in the direction of her oncoming attacker. Her hand flipped 180 degrees and the man dropped to the ground, clutching his ears. When he looked up again and saw the battle, his expression matched the other woman's. Yes! I thought. Bella was returning the people under Shira's control to normal. Maybe we could actually win this.

I looked up and ducked just in time to avoid Skye's blade-like talons as she swooped down towards me. I then deftly avoided more people as they ran at me, knocking a few to the ground just as I had seen Jet do.

"Marina!" My ears snapped in Bella's direction as her scream echoed across the confines of the canyon. Having noticed Bella's success in

restoring the minds of her minions, Shira had attacked Bella herself, wrapping one arm under Bella's shoulder and the other around her neck. Shira was dragging her towards the stream. If she got Bella there then we wouldn't stand a chance because once Bella got wet there would be no way she could get out of this canyon. But that wasn't the only reason why I was so afraid. Shira had the real Bella nowâ€"the only person who could fix the controlled peopleâ€"and, this time, I could tell from the look in Shira's eye that she wanted to kill Bella too.

I started to run towards Shira and Bella, but quickly stopped short, my path blocked by both a mountain lion and a tigerâ€"my dad and Cole. No. I had to get to Bella. But I couldn't hurt my dad and brother. Cole crouched down. I readied myselfâ€"I knew what was coming next. Sure enough, two seconds later, Cole had pounced, sailing through the air in my direction. I was about to dash under him when a blur of black collided with my brother's giant tiger form, causing him to collapse on the ground.

Jet shook his head and stood up. Walking over to me, he shifted back into human form. What was he doing? Being in human form in this situation made him extremely vulnerable.

"Marina, go," he instructed, "Go save Bella. I'll take care of them." My father let out a roar.

I shifted back too, despite the risk. "I can't leave you with them, Jet. They'll tear you to shreds."

He smiled that cocky smile I loved. "I'm stronger than you think."

I took a step towards him. "Jet, Iâ€"" I started but my words got lost when he cupped my cheek with his warm hand.

"I love you, Marina," Jet whispered, but even with the chaos surrounding us, his words had never been clearer. My heart swelled to the size of a hot air balloon.

Jet just told me he loved me. Sure when we first kissed he had said he was "in love" with me but that wasn't the same. Telling me he loved me was totally different, and even more incredible. He loved me. My longtime best friend turned boyfriend loved me. Even with this battle, the siren, and the possibility of being killed hanging over our heads, I somehow knew everything would be okay, all because Jet loved me andâ€|I loved him.

I opened my mouth to tell him that I loved him too, but my dad roared again and began advancing on us. Cole had also recovered from Jet's hit and was walking towards us. Jet gave me a quick kiss and when we broke apart he said, "Go. Bella needs you." I nodded and he then shifted back into his wolf form, growling at my dad and Cole. I raced off to help Bella, shifting midstride and leaving people sprawled on the ground in my wake.

"Marina!" Bella called again, struggling against Shira's harsh grip. When I got close enough I lunged at the siren. She fell to the floor, losing her grasp on Bellaâ€"who tumbled into the streamâ€"when we collided.

"You little pest," Shira snarled at me, standing up, "When are you

going to learn that you can't beat me?"

I just growled in response and started snapping in her direction. I would never kill anyone but that didn't mean I couldn't hurt her. After all she didâ€"to me, to my family, to my friends, to my townâ€"she deserved it. I snapped at her again, actually clipping her ankle this time. But I didn't feel flesh beneath my teeth. I bite her again and again. Her skin turned to water every time I bit her. I looked to Bella, who had managed to pull herself out of the water, to see if she had noticedâ€"she did. I snapped at again and againâ€"biting her all over as fast as I could.

"Keep going, Marina!" Bella urged, her voice full of excitement. My teeth clamped down over and over again, until I saw that the siren had abandoned her human form all together. I smiled to myself. Shira realized too late what she had done. Her eyes opened wide in shock as her entire body hardened to form the same glasslike substance that her hands were. Shira had been wrongâ€"we could beat herâ€"and we had.

I turned to see Bella's hand raisedâ€"her palm already to the sky. I swiveled my head around in the direction of the rest of the battle. All over the canyon people had dropped to their knees, holding their heads in their hands. Every person who looked up had a confused expression on their face. Every person except for four.

On the other side of the canyon my dad, brother, sister and mom (who I hadn't even realized was here) were huddled around something, and all had worried expressions on their faces. But there was no flash of white in their eyesâ€"they were themselves again.

I shifted back. "You okay?" I asked Bella.

"Yeah," she said as her legs reappeared, "go."

I raced across the canyon to my family. Finally, they were safe and they were back, and I couldn't wait to have their arms around me. But I slowed when I realized that it wasn't a something they were standing around but a someone. My heart immediately filled with dread as I remembered how I had left Jet to face two giant ferocious cats alone. No no no no. He couldn't be dead. He just couldn't. I loved him.

I walked up to them slowly, Cole and Skye stepping back a bit to let me into their tight-knit circle, and lying in the middle of that circle was Jet. There was a gash in his chest, that was still oozing a bit of blood even though he had already shifted back to his human form, and his leg was bent at a very unnatural angle. I knew Cole had been lying about broken bones healing when you shift. But it didn't matter because Jet was alive.

Kneeling down beside him I took his hand. "Jet?" I asked hesitantly.

His eyelids opened, revealing those majestic green eyes. "Marina?" He face contorted against the pain.

"I'm here." I squeezed his hand and I could feel him relax under my grip. Tears were slowly dripping down my cheeks. "Oh, Jet," I said, "I'm so sorry. I never should have left you."

"You had to," he whispered, "is Bella okay?"

I nodded. "Yes. And the siren is gone too. Everyone is back to normal."

"Good," he sighed, "Now we can focus."

"Focus? Focus on what?" I asked.

He smiled despite the pain. "Focus on us, of course."

I laughed.

"I love you, Marina."

There, he said it again. And now I had the chance to say it back. I reached my hand up and held it against the side of his face, staring into his eyes. "I love you too, Jet."

### 30. Normal

The bright California sun washed over me, bathing me in delicious skin-licking warmth. I sighed and breathed in the fresh salty mist that was spraying off the nearby ocean. I didn't realize until now how nice relaxing on a bed of sand without a worry in the world could be. It was wonderful. The feeling was so glorious that I was even beginning to wonder if it could be better than running through the woods or swimming through the ocean. Ehhh, no it wasn't, but it was definitely a close second.

I was woken from my thoughts by a soft kiss on the smooth skin of my shoulder. I opened my eyes, immediately blinded by the brightness of the hot sun. As my eyes adjusted to the new light, I turned my head to the left. "I thought you were asleep," I said to Jet.

"No I was just resting my eyes."

I scoffed. "You were out for at least fifteen minutes."

"Was I really?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Sorry," he said and leaned over for another kiss, on the lips this time—a kiss that I graciously accepted.

"I think you're allowed to sleep, Jet," I told him.

"Not if I am missing out on spending time with you."

"Enough," Tommy said, pushing up off his towel and onto his elbows, "I think I speak for both Bella and I when I say there is only so much lovey-dovey talk we can handle."

"I think they're cute," Bella said from underneath her dark shades.

"Sorry Tommy, looks like you're outnumbered on this one," I said,

laughing as he groaned and lied back down.

The four of us were lying on my private beach, simply relaxing, something that, in our opinion, we greatly deserved. It was the third day in a row that we spent out here. The town had cancelled school for today after the events with the siren. Not that people knew it was a siren that had messed up the whole town. The city officials had concluded that someone had dumped large amounts of drugs in the water mains and that was what had caused everyone to lose track of the past week or more. They had cut off all outward supplies of water for testing, but the four of us knew they wouldn't find anything. The water was supposed to come back on tomorrow, and the schools were to reopen then too.

"Is anyone else actually happy that we are going back to school tomorrow?" Tommy asked.

"I know I am," I said.

"Me too," Bella said, "But it'll be weird having everything go back to normal."

"Yeah, but at this point, I'd prefer an algebra test to any supernatural problem." Jet sat up on his towel.

"Uh, don't say that," I shook my head and sat up too, "I told my mom that I got an A on an algebra test that didn't exist so now I have to get an A on a real test."

Jet threw his arm around my shoulders and I leaned into him. "Don't worry, you can do it."

"I'm glad you have such confidence in my lack of algebra ability," I said sarcastically.

He just smiled. "Anytime."

I rolled my eyes but didn't respond. I wondered why it is always Jet who seems to win these sarcasm battles. I scooted over closer to him so that my shoulder was lightly resting against his sternum. I didn't move any closer—not wanting to touch his wound on the side. It had taken us two hours after the battle that day to stop the bleeding. The wound hadn't been gushing as I presumed it was before he shifted back but it still bled a lot and for a long time. But it did finally stop and the hospital stitched it up, placing gauze and a bandage over it afterwards. The whole time he was in the emergency room getting the gash stitched up, and even when I look at the spot now, I wonder how big and how deep of a gash it had to be to not heal when Jet shifted. I remembered the wound he got after first falling into the canyon, and I had thought \_that \_was bad. But when he shifted back then, the wound had already scabbed over. The one from the battle didn't even look like the blood in it had started to clot. And then, on top of that I had been right in thinking that Cole had lied about broken bones healing to fractures. After x-rays, the nurse in the emergency room told us that Jet's left leg was broken in three places, so, needless to say, he now has a giant cast on his left leg. My dad tried to get Jet's parents to let him pay for the hospital bills but they refused when he couldn't say why. I mean, what was he going to say? That either he or his son gave Jet those injuries because they are giant cats that were being commanded to attack

Jet-the-wolf by a psychotic, power maniac siren? I don't think so.

"By the way," Tommy started, "what did you guys do with the giant glass sculpture of Shira?"

"Marina and I moved her out of the canyon once after everyone went home," Bella said, sitting up on her towel now too, "She is resting comfortably at the bottom of the ocean right now."

"Where she belongs," I added.

When everyone woke up out of their trance, I had been so concerned about my family and then Jet when I realized he was hurt that I didn't give hardened Shira a second thought. Which wasn't smart because what were people going to think if they saw a glass woman in the middle of the woods? My dad already had to talk to the man and woman that Bella fixed before we defeated the siren (who were conveniently a newlywed couple) and have them promise they wouldn't say anything to anyone about what they saw. I didn't think we'd have been able to explain the statue of the siren if Bella hadn't been smart enough to quickly stick her behind a large tree until we were able to go back later and move her to the ocean. I was sure that the explanation that everyone had been drugged via the town's water mains wouldn't have held up had all the people in the canyon seen the siren. And then I wouldn't be lying here with my closest friends. Instead I'd be who knows where still moping about being forced to move. But I wasn't. I was here.

"Anyone up for a swim?" Bella asked, looking around at each of us eagerly.

"Sure, why not?" Tommy said.

Jet shook his head and pointed to his leg. "Cast isn't water proof."

"I think I'll keep him," I gestured to Jet beside me, "company up here today. Sorry Bella, next time?"

"Yeah, okay." She smiled at me and stood up along with Tommy. "You've never been swimming with a mermaid before have you?" she asked him.

Tommy shook his head. "Nope."

"You're in for a treat then," I said, winking at Bella. She smiled at me again and carefully placed her sunglasses on her towel. That's when I remembered. "Wait!, Bella!" I exclaimed.

"What?"

"Before you go, I wanted to give you this," I said as I pulled away from Jet. I began rummaging through my beach bag. "I hope you don't mind but I stole something from you."

She frowned, but it wasn't out of anger, more confusion.

"So that I could make this for you," I finished and pulled out a black necklace. Tied to the end of it was the blue crystal that I

stole back when the whole siren thing began. I had been able to tell that the crystals were special to her because they came from the cave in Ireland where she first turned into a mermaid, but up until now all she could do with them was admire them. Now she could wear one and keep it close to her at all times.

"Oh, Marina!" Bella whispered, "It's beautiful! But how?" When did you?"

"I knew how important the crystals were to you and I wanted to make sure you knew how important you are to me. You will always be my friend Bella, no matter what happens," I said, handing her the necklace. With the amount of times Bella had already moved, we both knew that there was a strong possibility she would move again in the future. But I wanted her to know that even if that happened I would still be there for her. I was sure that wherever she might end up she could always say that she has three friends.

She was beaming as she took it from me. "I don't know what to say. Thank you." She reached up and clasped the crystal around her neck. It definitely looked like it belonged there, nestled between her collar bones.

"You're welcome." I smiled back at her. Then she and Tommy ran down to where the waves were breaking against the sand.

I snuggled back in against Jet as I watched Bella dive under and Tommy hesitate to do the same. Jet's arm tightened around me. He smoothed my dark, salty hair and pressed a kiss to the top of my head. I turned to face him and this time he kissed me passionately on the lips, lingering there for a few seconds before pulling away. Taking Jet's hand, I looked back out at the ocean spread out in front of us and sighed with happiness.

It didn't matter what lied ahead, because todayâ€|today was perfect.

The End

\*\*Author Note:\*\* Thank you soooooo much to everyone who reviewed, sent me a PM, favorited, followed, or simply read my story. You were always so encouraging and really helped me to keep writing. I couldn't have made it to the end without you! I would like to give a special shout-out to liveonpurpose because she was the first person to leave a review and has consistently done so throughout my whole story. You are a great friend! Thanks!\*\*

\*\*Also, if you enjoyed this story please check out the sequel: Secrets in the Woods of California\*\*. Marina is headed for trouble once again when she and Jet run into an entire clan of shapeshifters. Are these newcomers friend or foe? Or could there be an even deadlier enemy lurking behind the very trees Marina grew up in? Read to find out!\*\*

\*\*Once again, thank you to everyone and I hope you continue reading! : )\*\*

End  
file.